

MARKS OF THE TRUE CHURCH.

By Rev. J. Spencer Northcote, D.D., in "Fourfold Difficulties of Anglicanism."

III.

IN considering the point of Unity as it concerns the Established Church of England, it cannot but be fair to look on that Church in the character which you yourself assign to it—that, namely, of a National Church, forming a part of the one Church Catholic. Looking upon her, then, in this point of view, we are naturally led to enquire how she stands in relation to the other national churches, which with her, according to this theory, make up the Catholic Church, and with which we should therefore expect her to be one, in "origination," in "hope," in "charity," in "discipline," in "sacraments," and in "faith," in which six points, according to your Bishop Pearson, the unity of the Church consists. Now, of these, the unity of "origination" and of "hope" may be claimed alike by all Christians of whatever denomination. but can it be said that the English Church, as a body, is one with other churches even in the unity of charity? and is it not a fact almost too obvious to mention, that in point of discipline and sacraments, in point of faith and doctrine, there is no one Christian society in the world, excepting only her own offshoots and dependencies, with whom she is in communion? In former years, indeed, there was a boasted union of all the Reformed churches, the Church of England among the rest. "Blessed be God," says Bishop Hall, "there is no difference in any especial matter between the Church of England and her sister churches of the Reformation, we accord in every point of Christian doctrine without the least variation; their public confessions and ours are sufficient convictions to the world of our full and absolute agreement. The only difference is in the form of outward administration, wherein also we are so far agreed, as that we all profess this form not to be essential to the being of a Church, not seeing any reason why so poor a diversity should work any alienation of affection in us one towards another." Such was the tone and temper of the English church for many generations after the Reformation, and I suppose a very large proportion of her people, her clergy, and bishops, still in some sense make common cause with the Protestant churches of the continent; such, at least was the temper indicated by the proceedings in the matter of the Jerusalem bishopric, some forty years ago, in the course of which the Prussian government was allowed to declare without contradiction, that the English church, "both by origin and doctrine, is most intimately akin to the German Evangelical church," and the Bishop of London, preaching about the same time before the King of Prussia, exhorted his hearers "not to think or speak more uncharitably of other national churches (i. e. the Lutheran, &c.) than the fathers of their own (the English) had spoken." The same spirit also is manifested in the proceedings of the more recent Pan Anglican Synod at Lambeth, where the right hand of fellowship was held out to Protestant nonconformists at home.

Still, however, the English church cannot be said to be in communion with any of these, and, on some important points of discipline and doctrine, she is at variance with them all. This, indeed, you, and those who think with you, would be only too ready to admit; you would indignantly repudiate all suspicion of unity between the Church of England and the Protestant communions; your theory being, that those national bodies are cut off from the Catholic Church, while the English communion, on the other hand, is a branch of that Church, the Roman Church (under which general name are included, be it remembered, besides the Roman Church, strictly so called, the several national churches under its obedience) being another branch, and the Greek Church a third. so that, in spite of all seeming differences, there is a real vital unity between the English and Roman communions, so close, that they may be considered branches of the same tree, "parts" of the same "vineyard."

But, my dear friend, is this anything more than a theory—a theory on paper, contradicted by the experience of three hundred years? Is not the Church of England, in point of fact, out of communion with the Church of Rome? Nay, does she not denounce that Church, repudiate some of her doctrines, charge her with idolatry, and even call her by the name of Antichrist? And, on the other hand, does not the Church of Rome utterly deny the claim the Church of England to be of the Church Catholic, and excommunicate all her bishops, clergy and people as open heretics and schismatics? "These two branches not only have no formal or visible fraternity, union, or communion as churches, but reciprocally denounce each other as false, heretical, and Antichristian. We speak not of the writings, speculations, tracts, or opinions of individual ecclesiastics, but of the established and authorized documents of each of these would be Catholic Churches, all of which confessedly go to the denial of the Christianity, Apostolicity, and Catholicity of the other." This is evidently the language of one who is neither an English churchman nor a Roman Catholic, but it is also the language of common sense, honesty, and fairness. And, with these facts before us, I am at a loss to conceive how any one can seriously maintain the existence of vital and essential unity between the two communions.

It would not be necessary to mention the Greek Church, except that it is sometimes spoken of as a possible thing to bring about "friendly relations" between it and the Church of England. But, it is manifest that, in point of fact, not only is there at present no communion between them, but that, in every doctrine and practice in which the English Church differs from the Roman, except, of course, the one question of the supremacy, she differs also from the Greek Church; therefore, it is mere unreality to pretend that she finds in the East a sympathy denied her by the churches of the West.

But, it may be said, all this is too true; and yet this unhappy severance of England from the rest of Christendom is so far from being a token against her, that it is the consequence of her fidelity to the truth. She is separated from the churches in the Roman obedience, because those churches still obstinately adhere to the corruptions with which time has overlaid the pure faith of the Gospel: while she, on the other hand, having once participated with them in the same corruptions, has nobly arisen and purified herself, and now holds the faith in its primitive simplicity, as it was taught in the early stages of the Church. And she is separated from the other Protestant bodies because, when she thus cast aside her corruptions, she still faithfully adhered to the Apostolic type of doctrine and discipline, retaining as much of the system of the existing Church as was conformable to that type, while they on the contrary, formed to themselves a new religion, which they professed to draw straight from the Bible, and which is utterly without sanction in the records of Christian antiquity. Thus, it may be said, she stands alone, as a necessary consequence of her position, she is the one middle point of truth between two errors. This is no small pretension, representing, as it does, the Church of England in the character of the single confessor for the truth in the face of all the churches of Christendom, alone "faithful found among the faithless." Surely, a church, venturing on so bold a position as this, ought, one would think, to bear some very marked tokens of her calling to an office, which, as all must admit, it requires little short of inspiration to fulfil; and as, while error is diverse, truth can be but one, the especial mark for which we should naturally look in this sole champion of the truth, would be unity in herself.

But what is the condition in this respect of the Church of England? Is it not confessed on all hands, and bewailed the most loudly by the most devoted of her children that, on some of the most fundamental questions of the Christian religion, there exist in her "notorious doctrinal oppositions, not mere differences, not shades of opinion, not open questions, but downright, flat, patent contradictions," that she allows "one set of men to preach one doctrine, and another to preach its logical and consequential contradictory." This contradiction is so palpable, that the most uneducated have been heard to express their surprise, when a change of teachers has not brought with it a change of doctrine; and I suppose you could hardly find ten consecutive parishes in any part of the country, or name a single large town, where the same doctrines are taught from every pulpit. It has even been found necessary sometimes to furnish a bishop with a theological chart of the parish in which he was to preach, that he might know where to speak, and where to be silent, in order to bribe him into silence in one church on all "controversial subjects," he was reminded that in another, a few hundred yards distant, but in the same parish, he would have full scope for preaching what he liked—that is, what he considered to be exclusively the true and pure Gospel. Look at the rival streams of theological literature daily pouring from the press; pamphlets, magazines, and newspapers, tracts against tracts, sermons against sermons. Look at the rival societies formed for the purpose of disseminating doctrines so entirely contradictory, that the one party denounces as a "soul-destroying heresy" what the other proclaims to be "the very commencement and basis of the Christian life;" the one puts forth as "the sum and substance of the Gospel" what the other does not hesitate to characterize as an "awful delusion" and a "snare of the devil."

The fact of this absence of unity in the Church of England is so glaring and unquestionable, that it is not necessary in order to establish it, to look into the details of her disunion; at the same time it is a fact of such importance, that it ought not to be glossed over, as it sometimes is, by a sort of general formula, "acknowledging and deploring the existence of differences," without an attempt to realize the extent of those differences and their fundamental character.

It is true that many would represent them as one doctrinal disagreement, which others endeavour to magnify into formidable proportions. But what is that one doctrinal disagreement, and what does it involve? Is it not concerning the cardinal doctrine, so to speak of the Christian system, the nature and mode of man's justification? Surely, then, the question at issue between the two contending parties in the English church is nothing less than this, what the true Gospel really is, for only consider how many subjects of Christian doctrine stand, more or less immediately, in necessary connection with the doctrine of justification—original sin, the freedom of the human will, Divine grace, faith, repentance, good works, sanctification, assurance of salvation, purification after death; all these must needs be understood in senses wholly different, nay, some of them received or rejected altogether, according to the different views on this point. Farther, only to mention at present one portion of this great subject, the mode