

Edward Stillingfleet (1635-1699)

A Pioneer of Reunion

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At the present time when, throughout the world, and especially in our own land, as illustrated by the Archbishop of Canterbury's recent proposal to the Free Churches, Christian thought and action is more than ever concerned to restore the broken Fellowship of the Body of Christ, it may be well to recall the life and teaching of one of the earliest apostles of Reunion.

I.

Edward Stillingfleet, a descendant of landed gentry who hailed from Stillingfleet in Yorkshire, was born at Cranborne, Dorset, on April 17, 1635, when England was under the 'Absolute' regime of Strafford and Laud. He was educated privately, and in 1648 gained an Exhibition to St. John's College, Cambridge, being admitted a scholar shortly after on the nomination of the Earl of Salisbury. He made such good progress in his studies that in 1653, soon after taking his B.A., he was elected a Fellow of his College. He secured his B.D. in 1665 and the D.D. three years later. He spent two years (1655-7) in a Tutorship at Nottingham; then in 1657 he was appointed Rector of Sutton, Bedfordshire, having been secretly ordained by Dr. Brownrigg, the ejected Bishop of Exeter. He disapproved of the rigid conditions imposed in the Act of Uniformity and charitably sheltered an ejected minister in his rectory and converted a large house into a school for another.

He soon acquired great fame as a writer of exceptional merit. At the age of twenty-seven he published his *Origines Sacrae*, which was esteemed one of the best defences of Revealed Religion ever written. Two years later he wrote a powerful rejoinder to a Romish attack on Laud's *Answer to the Jesuit Fisher*. Preferment followed quickly, as he was made successively Preacher at the Rolls Chapel, Rector of St. Andrew's, Holborn, and then Lecturer at the Temple. This last post gained him the notice and friendship of the celebrated Lord Chief Justice, Sir Matthew Hale. In 1670 he was made a Royal Chaplain and a Residentiary Canon of St. Paul's on the special commendation of the King, and he soon after succeeded Sancroft as Dean of St. Paul's. During the heated controversy occasioned by the Popish Plot and James II's sinister attempt to overthrow Protestantism, Stillingfleet preached and wrote powerfully in defence of the Reformed Faith. He charged the Church of Rome with "heinous idolatry" in the worship of the Host, and he convicted it of palpable inconsistency in admitting the validity of non-Roman baptism for membership in the Catholic Church and then claiming that the Roman was the only Catholic Church. He courageously refused to obey James II's peremptory order to read the Declaration of Indulgence in 1688. As Prolocutor of Convocation in 1687, Stillingfleet took a leading part in the Jerusalem Chamber Conference, and in October of that year he was appointed Bishop of Worcester, a diocese which he served most diligently and conscientiously for ten years till his death in March 1699. Stillingfleet was twice married and had ten children, only two of whom survived him and both of these were ordained.

He was an eloquent and arresting preacher of a fervent, heart-moving, hortatory type, although his sermons were sufficiently simple to reach the common people. Bishop Burnet declared that Stillingfleet owed his preferment “entirely to the great merit of his publications”,¹ and he describes him as “a man of much learning” and as “a great man in many respects, and esteemed a very wise man.”¹ His biographer confirms this estimate when he says that “his apprehension was quick and sagacious, his judgment exact and profound, his memory very tenacious and his insight into persons quick and just.”² “The known strength and impartiality of his judgment, and the depth and extensiveness of his learning “led him, he adds, “to be often referred to by all sorts and conditions for advice.”³

II.

It is, however, for his remarkable treatise on Church Unity, written when he was only twenty-two, that Stillingfleet is best remembered, since the clear and forceful case he sets forth in this famous *Eirenicon* or “Weapon Salve for the Wounds of the Church” is by no means out of date to-day, and it was exceedingly popular at the time and throughout the following century. Burnet declared that it “was of so much learning and moderation that it was esteemed a masterpiece.”¹ While Stillingfleet, as he states in the Preface, “endeavoured to recommend the episcopal government as having the advantage of all others and coming nearest to apostolic practice,”⁴ his main aim was to inquire if one form of Church government “is founded upon Divine right so that all ages and churches are bound unalterably to observe it.”⁴ He points out that the most eminent divines of the Reformation period did never conceive any one form “necessary.”⁵ He referred to Jewel, Whitgift, Cooper, Bridges, Hooker, Andrewes and Hales in support of his contention that no one form of Church government “is determined of in the Word of God, but is variable as occasion ariseth.” Accordingly when examining the Elizabethan Religious Settlement, Stillingfleet points out that all that was “agreed upon” in the 39 Articles was “that our English form of Church government was only determined to be agreeable to God’s Holy Word”; which, he maintains, “was a very low and diminishing expression had they looked on it as absolutely prescribed and determined in Scripture as the only necessary form to be observed in the Church.”⁶ Stillingfleet is obviously referring to the significant want of definition or designation of Article XXIII of the particular Church officers “who have public authority given them in the Congregation to call and send ministers into the Lord’s vineyard”—language which will equally well embrace the “call” or ordination of the minister by an Independent Congregation as the traditional episcopal ordination of the Church of England! It should not be forgotten also that this is still the official Anglican teaching concerning “Ministering in the Congregation.”

Stillingfleet further declares that “it was acknowledged by the stoutest champions for episcopacy before these late unhappy divisions that ordination by presbyters in cases of necessity is valid, which doth evidently prove that episcopacy is not founded upon any unalterable divine right.” and that “no one form is settled by an unalterable law of Christ.”⁷

In fact, Stillingfleet, upon the strictest inquiry, asserts his belief in the “identity of both name and order of bishops and presbyters in the primitive Church.” Laud had told Fisher that the Apostolic Succession which the Fathers mentioned was not “tied to place or person, but to the verity of doctrine.”⁸ Stillingfleet, in discussing the alleged “successions,” says that the succession in Rome is “as muddy as the Tiber itself,” and if the line of succession fail us here, we have little cause to pin our faith on it as to the certainty of any particular form of

Church government settled in the Apostles' times, which can be drawn from the help of the records of the primitive Church. These must "first be cleared of defectiveness, before the thing we inquire for can be extracted out of them."⁹ He sarcastically denounces the view that for the successions of bishops we must be dependent on the tradition of the Church. "Must the tradition of the Church," he asks, "be our rule to interpret the Scriptures by?"

This, he adds, is "to make Scripture stand cap in hand to tradition, to know whether it may have leave to speak or no."¹⁰ Stillingfleet ends his tolerant and powerful treatise with the earnest desire, which all true disciples of Christ would re-echo to-day, that "the wise and gracious God would send us one heart and one way, that He would be the composer of our differences and the repairer of our breaches, that of our strange divisions and unchristian animosities, while we pretend to serve the Prince of Peace, we may at last see the end."¹¹

On the vexed question of the imposition of "things indifferent" in rites and ceremonies, which was the great bone of contention with the Puritans at this time, Stillingfleet took a tolerant and charitable line and he pleaded for a diversity in use, which all working for Church unity to-day would gladly concede. "Without all controversy," he declared, "the main inlet of all the distractions, confusions and divisions of the Christian World, has been the adding other conditions of Church Communion than Christ has done."¹² He adds: "Were we so happy but to take off things granted unnecessary by all, and suspected by many, and judged unlawful by some, and to make nothing the bonds of our communion but what Christ hath done, viz., one Faith, one Communion, one Baptism, allowing a liberty for matters of indifference, we might indeed be restored to a true primitive lustre far sooner than by furbishing up some antiquated ceremonies which can derive their pedigree no higher than from some ancient customs and tradition. God will some day convince men that the union of the Church lies more in the unity of faith and affection than in a uniformity of doubtful rites and ceremonies." "In the primitive Church," he declares, "it was never thought worth while to make any standing laws for rites and customs that had no other original but tradition, much less to suspend men from her communion for not observing them."¹² And so he concludes: "I am sure it is contrary to primitive practice, and the moderation then used, to suspend or deprive men of their ministerial function for not conforming in habits and gestures and the like."¹³

Unfortunately this was precisely what in effect the Act of Uniformity did, only two years later, with the Puritan ministers who conscientiously were unable to accept some rites and ceremonies which the National Church had thought it expedient to order. Although such Ceremonies presented no difficulty to Stillingfleet, as they did to the Dissenters, it was strangely inconsistent for him twenty years later, in his sermon on the "Mischief of Separation" to indict the Nonconformists as "schismatics" for this very reason. Burnet asserts rather too dogmatically that Stillingfleet had by this time retracted the views expressed in his *Erenicon*. But although it is true that Stillingfleet said in 1684, "I do now think much more is to be said for the apostolical institution of episcopacy than I at that time apprehended,"¹⁴ it is certain that he never retracted his opinion that no one form of Church government is "settled by an unalterable law of Christ." This is clear since he fully concurred in the proposed "Comprehension Scheme" at the Jerusalem Chamber Conference, 1689, which provided for the acceptance, without re-ordination, of foreign presbyterian ministers in the Church of England. And although under this Scheme English presbyterian ministers were required to receive episcopal Orders, it was explained that this requirement did not "compel them to renounce their former ordination, but was ordered simply because many have and still do doubt of the validity of such ordination where episcopal ordination may be had and is *by law*

required; so it shall be sufficient for such persons to receive ordination from a bishop in this or the like form—‘If thou art not already ordained I ordain thee’.” In fact, it was largely a compliance with the existing rigid, intolerant rule of “One State, only one religion,” which was only abrogated with the enactment of the Toleration Act of 1689.

In 1668 Stillingfleet had joined with Tillotson, Bates, Baxter and Manton in drawing up terms for reconciling the Dissenters, to be presented to Parliament by Lord Keeper Bridgman and Sir Matthew Hale. These were based on the King’s Declaration from Breda and allowed for presbyterian Orders. The Commons, however, refused to entertain the project. Again in 1680 he had also joined in a Comprehension Scheme with Howe, Bates and Tillotson which was, however, also dropped in Parliament. Even in his *Unreasonableness of Separation*, published in 1685, Stillingfleet was willing to concede the optional use of the sign of the Cross in Baptism and kneeling at Communion and was prepared for a further review and considerable revision of the Prayer Book. In common with other prominent post-Restoration Church dignitaries like Cosin, Sharp and Wake, Stillingfleet had no intention of refusing Communion to and fellowship with non-episcopalians and thus creating a “schism” between the Church of England and other Reformed Churches. In this connection it should not be forgotten that in spite of the express rule in the revised Ordinal for exclusive episcopal ordination in the Church of England, the Restoration bishops of the Scottish Church (who had been consecrated by Anglican bishops) permitted the existing presbyterian ministers, who so desired, to retain their parish cures without further ordination, and again in 1689 were prepared to admit the validity of presbyterian Orders.¹⁵

III.

As the official Church of England view of the Ministry has not been changed since Stillingfleet’s day, his examination of its teaching and position still holds good, and recent research and scholarship have not seriously challenged his conclusions. Even the latest erudite work on the *Apostolic Ministry*, with all its special partisan pleading, relies basically on conjecture and mere unproved assumptions in its attempt to supersede Bishop Lightfoot’s learned conclusion that “the episcopate was formed not out of the Apostolic by localisation but out of the presbyterate by elevation, and the title which was originally common to all, came at length to be appropriated to the chief among them.”¹⁶ For the special functions of Christ’s Apostles as “witnesses” to His Resurrection and depositaries of His teaching were intransmissible, while their itinerant labours in the gospel and in founding churches resembled those of the roving “prophets” and not those of the early presbyter-bishop of a single congregation. Even their power of ordination was, as the record of the Church at Antioch proves, shared with the “prophets and teachers”. There is no evidence to show that the Apostles passed on their Christ-bestowed commission to anyone, still less that they carefully discriminated between the early bishop and presbyter, and transmitted their special apostolic commission to the former and not to the latter. Lightfoot confirmed (and then Dean Armitage Robinson) what Stillingfleet had asserted, when he said that “the Christian ministry was gradually evolved in response to fresh needs which came with new conditions as the Church grew in numbers and enlarged its geographical boundaries.”¹⁷ More recently Bishop Headlam declared after “reading everything from the Fathers which is quoted in favour of Apostolic Succession,” that “of any idea that the bishops’ spiritual gifts depended upon transmission from the Apostles or that they in ordination transmitted grace to others which had come down to them from the Apostles, there is no evidence at all.”¹⁸

As we read Stillingfleet's careful review of the teaching and practice of our Reformed Church on the Ministry we must fully concur with Bishop Henson's conclusion, stated over thirty-five years ago in his "Robert Lee" Lecture in Edinburgh. "I find," he says, "no justification either in the formularies of the Church of England or in the writings of its representative divines, for the insistence on 'Apostolical Succession' . . . which now seems to have established itself in official circles."¹⁹ We ought also to agree with Dr. Henson when he declares that "it is the right and duty of every member of the Church of England who values the heritage of spiritual liberty implicit in his membership of a Reformed Church, to communicate with other Reformed Churches wherever and whenever the opportunity to do so may be given him. So doing he will assuredly be true to the principles and best traditions of his own Reformed Church."²⁰

This surely is the best immediate practical method of implementing the Archbishop of Canterbury's earnest desire for closer Christian fellowship, by way of mutual communion, with the English Free Churches. Moreover it is quite clear that the Anglican Confirmation rubric presents no bar to such intercommunion, since it is, as Archbishop Davidson ruled in the Kikuyu Judgment, "a domestic regulation for our own people only."²¹ Otherwise it could easily have been used to prevent the objectionable practice of early 17th century Nonconformists attending Church Communion to qualify for Civil offices as required by law. The "Occasional Conformity Bill" (1711) stopped this practice, not by forbidding it, but by heavily fining the offender if during the ensuing year he attended a Nonconformist "Conventicle"! In July, 1923, a Memorandum on the "Status of the existing Free Church Ministry" from the Anglican representatives at a Joint Conference affirmed that such ministries are "real ministries of Christ's Word and Sacraments in the Universal Church." The Archbishop of Canterbury now asks the Free Churches to accept episcopacy into their Systems. If they agree to do this for the sake of a more fully recognised fellowship, it could surely be achieved, on the lines of the South India Church Scheme, by Free Church Ministers joining with Anglican bishops in the consecration and commissioning of certain of their Ministers as regional "bishops" of their Churches. This would at once secure a practical recognition of this affirmation of the validity of Free Church ministries, as well as give such ministries a link with the historic Episcopate which many Churchmen regard as essential. At the same time, as such Ministers were only being set apart for another "grade" of the Ministry, it would not challenge their existing Orders or violate the Resolution of the Cheltenham Conference of Evangelical Churchmen (1919) that "no proposals for reunion which involve the reordination of ministers would be welcome or practicable."

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Endnotes:

- 1) *History of His Own Times*, p. 175 (1875).
- 2) *Life of Bishop Stillingfleet*, p. 138 (1710).
- 3) *Ibid.*, p. 142.
- 4) *Eirenicon*, Pref., p. 12 (1662).
- 5) *Ibid.*, Pt. II, Ch. viii.

- 6) *Ibid.*, Ch. viii., Sect. iii., p. 393.
- 7) *Ibid.*, Sect. vii., p. 413.
- 8) *Conference with Fisher*, Sect. xxxix., p. 250.
- 9) *Eirenicon*, Sect. xviii., pp. 321-2.
- 10) *Ibid.*, ch. vi., Sect. xvi.
- 11) *Ibid.*, Ch. viii., p. 416.
- 12) *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- 13) *Ibid.*, p. 66.
- 14) *Works*, I. p. 357.
- 15) Cardwell, *History of Conferences*, p. 421.
- 16) *Christian Ministry*, v. 196.
- 17) *Early History of Church and Ministry*, p. 91.
- 18) *Doctrine of the Church and Christian Reunion*, pp. 128-9
- 19) *Relation of the C. of E. to the Other Reformed Churches*, pp. 99.
- 20) *Ibid.*, p. 93.
- 21) *Kikuyu*, p. 27.