

DISTINCTIVE VESTMENTS

Church Association Tract 033

BY REV. CANON J. C. RYLE
VICAR OF STRADBROKE

WHAT is the meaning of the expression which heads this paper? What are these "*distinctive vestments*," about which there is so much controversy among Churchmen? Are they of any real importance? Ought they to be formally sanctioned or not? To these questions it is proposed in this paper to supply an answer.

"Distinctive Vestments," then, are certain articles of ministerial dress, which some clergymen wish to be allowed to wear in the celebration of the Lord's Supper, and declare they cannot be satisfied unless they are allowed. It is asserted that these vestments are specially and peculiarly connected with the office which the clergyman performs in that sacrament, and that he ought to be allowed to wear them in that part of his ministrations, if in no other.

Now, what are these famous "Vestments" to which such importance is attached? It may be useful to have our minds clearly informed about this. A surplice, a hood, and a scarf, most people understand. But what are these "distinctive vestments?" They are described in the Directorium Anglicanum, and in Dr. Blakeney's admirable work on the Prayer Book, a book which every faithful Churchman ought to read in the present day. The three principal vestments are these:

1. *The alb*: a linen garment, fitting close to the body, reaching to the feet, and bound with a girdle.
2. *The chasuble*: a silken robe, worn over the alb, richly embroidered, and open in front.
3. *The cope*: a garment of a circular form, something like a poncho, with an opening for the head, cut out at the sides for the arms, leaving a straight pendent piece behind and before.

Such are the articles of dress which are disturbing the Church of England at the present time. Such is the apparel which many tell us is almost essential for the right celebration of the Lord's Supper. Such are the "distinctive vestments," which, it is commonly reported, many *members of Convocation are actually prepared to advise Parliament to sanction!*

Now the grave question which I want all faithful Churchmen in this day to consider is this:—Is there any real objection to these articles of dress being worn by those clergymen who like them, in celebrating the Lord's Supper? Is there any good and solid reason why clergymen; who, beside a surplice, a hood, and a scarf, wish to wear an alb, a chasuble, and a cope, should not be allowed to wear them? Let us see.

The first idea of many innocent and simple-minded Churchmen is to let every clergyman do as he likes, and to allow the widest liberty and toleration.—"Where is the use," they say, "of making such a stir about a mere question of outward apparel? Why not let people alone, if they are earnest and hard-working clergymen? Why not allow them to indulge their taste? What can it really signify in the end? How can a few chasubles, and copes, and albs do any harm to the Church of England?"—To all who talk and think in this way I venture to offer a few plain facts about these "vestments," which cannot be disputed, and I invite them to consider them well. Most of them are historical facts, which any intelligent reader can verify for himself. I challenge all who are disposed to make light of the "vestment" question, to look these facts fairly in the face.

1. It is a fact that there is not the slightest proof in Scripture, that any “distinctive vestments” were worn, or considered necessary for the due celebration of the Lord’s Supper, in the days of the Apostles. These “vestments” are purely and entirely an invention of a later age and of uninspired men. The gorgeous dress of the high-priest in the Mosaic dispensation was never meant to be a pattern to the Christian Church. It was part of a typical system, which was ordained for a special purpose, and was intended to pass away.

2. It is a fact that the use of these “distinctive vestments” is one of the many distinctive marks of the Church of Rome. That unhappy Church connects them closely with that crowning error and blasphemous delusion in her theological system—the sacrifice of the Mass!

3. It is a fact that in the beginning of the English Reformation, when our Reformers were only half enlightened, the use of these distinctive vestments was expressly ordered. The first Prayer Book of Edward the VIth, put forth in 1549, contains the following words in the rubric before the Communion Service:—“The priest shall put upon him the vestment appointed for the ministration of the Holy Communion, that is to say, a white alb plain, with a vestment or cope.”

4. It is a fact that, as soon as our Reformers saw Scriptural truth fully and clearly, they expressly forbade the clergy to use these “distinctive vestments.” The second Prayer Book of Edward the VIth, put forth in 1552, contains the following words at the beginning of the morning service, “The priest shall wear neither alb, vestment, nor cope,—but he shall have and wear a surplice only.”

5. It is a fact that when the English Reformation was begun over again in the difficult days of Elizabeth, after Bloody Mary’s destructive reign, the only rubric put forth about the ministers’ dress, expressly omits to mention the “distinctive vestments,” and only directs, in vague and general language, “such ornaments to be used as were in use in the second year of Edward VI.”—But that these “ornaments” did not mean the famous Popish “vestments,” as some assert now-a-days, is made as nearly certain as possible by two historical facts. One is, that in the first year of her reign, Elizabeth issued “injunctions” ordering ministers to “wear such seemly habits as were most commonly received in the LATTER DAYS of King Edward VI.”—The other is, that in 1564, the Queen issued “advertisements,” in which it is ordered that “every minister saying prayers or administering sacraments shall wear a comely surplice.” Neither in the injunctions or advertisements are the alb, the cope, or the chasuble mentioned.—*Cardwell’s Documentary Annals*, vol. i. p. 193, 292.

6. It is a fact that in 1569, Archbishop Parker, the first primate under Elizabeth, issued “Articles of inquiry” for the whole province of Canterbury, containing the following question:—“Whether your priests, curates, or ministers do use in the times of the celebration of divine service to wear a surplice, as prescribed by the Queen’s injunctions and the book of Common Prayer.”—*Cardwell’s Documentary Annals*, vol. i. 321.

7. It is a fact that in 1576 Archbishop Grindal, the second primate under Elizabeth, issued “articles of inquiry” for the whole province of Canterbury, in which he expressly asks “whether all vestments, albs, tunicles, &c., and such other relics and monuments of superstition and idolatry, be utterly defaced, broken and destroyed.”—Parker Society, *Grindal’s Remains*, p. 159. The same inquiry was made by Aylmer, Bishop of London in 1577, and by Sandys, Archbishop of York in 1578. Whether it is in the least likely that such an imperious Sovereign as Queen Elizabeth would have allowed such inquiries to be made, if the “ornaments rubric” legalized the vestments, is a question I leave to any one of common sense to answer!

8. It is a fact that the Canons of 1604 say nothing about “distinctive vestments,” as essential to the due celebration of the Lord’s Supper. The 58th canon simply orders that “Every minister saying the public prayers, or ministering the sacraments, or other rites of the Church, shall wear a decent and comely surplice.” This canon is the more remarkable, because the 24th canon orders the cope to

be worn “in cathedrals” by those who administer the communion. However much we may regret that the “cope” is sanctioned in cathedrals, it must be remembered that the chasuble and not the cope, is peculiarly the sacrificial garment. The use of the chasuble is not ordered.

9. It is a fact that at the last revision of our Prayer Book, in the year 1662, nothing whatever was done to restore the “distinctive vestments,” and not a word was added to our rubrics that could justify the use of them.

10. It is a fact that for nearly three hundred years these “distinctive vestments” have never been used in the parish churches of the Church of England. Whatever some men may please to say, in the present day, about the lawfulness of alb, chasuble or cope, there is no getting over the fact that all *custom* is dead against them, and that from the first days of Queen Elizabeth they have been disused and laid aside.

11. It is a fact that the attempt to revive the use of “distinctive vestments,” in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, is a thing of entirely modern date. It began with a party in the Church, which boldly avows its desire to unprotestantize the Church of England. It is pressed forward and supported almost entirely by those churchmen who, both in doctrine and practice, are making unmistakable approaches toward the Church of Rome, and regard the Lord’s Supper as a sacrifice.

12. Last, but not least, it is a fact that the principal advocates of the Ritualistic movement in the Church of England, distinctly and expressly avow that the “distinctive vestments” in the Lord’s Supper are not taken up and pressed upon us as a mere matter of taste, but as sacrificial garments and the outward expression of an inward doctrine. That doctrine is nothing less than the Romish doctrine of a real corporal presence, a real sacrifice, a really sacrificing priest, and a real altar in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. That this is the fact any one may satisfy himself by reading the evidence of Mr. Bennett, the Vicar of Frome, given before the Royal Commissioners in 1867, (First report, p. 72.) Mr. Bennett, in reply to a question, distinctly told the Commissioners that “the use of the chasuble involved the doctrine of sacrifice,” and that “he considered he offered a propitiatory sacrifice in the Lord’s Supper.”

I lay these twelve facts before my readers, and commend them to their serious attention. I entreat them, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them. I unhesitatingly assert, in the face of these facts, that it is impossible to defend the use of the “distinctive vestment’s” in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, either by Scripture, the Prayer Book, the law of the land, or custom. Reason and common sense alike, condemn them. I assert furthermore that it is no trifling matter to allow any clergyman to use these vestments, that the allowance will be the concession of a great principle, and that any effort that may be made, either in Convocation or Parliament, to obtain sanction for them, ought to be firmly resisted by every faithful Churchman.

I now call on every one who really loves the Church of England to use every effort to prevent “distinctive vestments” being sanctioned by the law of the land. If any doubting, hesitating, peace-loving Churchman asks me why, I offer him the following reasons:

(a.) Because the “distinctive vestments” are utterly without warrant of Scripture, are not in the slightest degree essential to the due celebration of the Lord’s Supper, and are not of the slightest use to the souls of Christian worshippers.

(b.) Because the “distinctive vestments” were deliberately rejected and expressly forbidden by the English Reformers at the brightest period of the Reformation, and to sanction the use of them again would be an insult to the memory of the very men who were martyred at Oxford and Smithfield.

(c.) Because the Church of England has done well enough without the “distinctive vestments” for three hundred years, and at the present time does not need more “ornaments,” but more preaching the Gospel and more holy living among its ministers.

(d.) Because the immense majority of the laity do not want the “distinctive vestments” to be worn by the clergy, and are quite satisfied with the customary surplice and hood. They wish for no innovation in the dress of ministers, and are likely to regard the sanction of them with annoyance and disgust. In short, the “vestments” may bring on secession, disruption and disestablishment.

(e.) Because the “distinctive vestments” are avowedly connected with one of the worst and most dangerous doctrines of the Church of Rome—viz., the sacrifice of the mass; and the sanction of them would therefore be displeasing to God, because highly dishonouring to the priestly office and finished work of our Lord Jesus Christ.

(f.) Because the adoption of the “distinctive vestments” is justly calculated to give great offence to the whole body of English nonconformists, and is likely to alienate them more and more from the Established Church, and to render reunion and comprehension impossible.

(g.) Because the sanction of the “distinctive vestments” would be a public declaration to the whole world, that the clergy of the Church of England wish to go back from the pure and Scriptural principles of Protestantism, on which the Church was first established, and to make a nearer approach to the Church of Rome, from which their forefathers seceded. In short, the “vestments” are a direct retrograde step towards Popery.

(h.) Because the sanction of “distinctive vestments” will more than ever separate the clergy of the Church of England into two opposing parties—those who wear sacrificial garments at the Lord’s table, and those who do not wear them. So far from the liberty to wear them promoting peace, it will only increase and multiply our “unhappy divisions.”

(i.) Because the sanction of “distinctive vestments” will only please a small minority of restless Churchmen, who have long avowed their dislike to Protestantism, while it will seriously offend that large mass of English people who are deeply attached to the principles of the Reformation.

For these reasons I now call on all Churchmen who love the old Church of England, on all English Christians who love Christ, on all who dislike priestcraft or sacerdotalism, to unite as one man in resisting the efforts now being made to obtain a legal sanction for the use of “distinctive vestments” in the Established Church, at the Lord’s Supper. For peace sake let us be ready to concede much. On indifferent matters let us allow the utmost liberty to men’s consciences. But we must never give up Christ’s truth,—If any persons want to have the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper formally declared to be a sacrifice, or want a sacrificial dress to be formally legalised at the Communion table of the Church of England, let us resolve firmly, that we will never, never, never consent.—Let our common watchword throughout England and Wales be this,—a Protestant Established Church, or else no Established Church at all! No compromise with Popery, whatever be the consequence! No peace with Rome! Those that want “the mass” ought to go outside the Church of England.