

THE EASTWARD POSITION

Church Association Tract 30

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“THE famous expression which heads this page demands the serious attention of all English Churchmen. It is bound up with a subject which is causing much excitement, and making a great stir in many minds. It is of the utmost importance to have clear views about it.

What does this “Eastward Position” mean? Where is the harm of it? To these two questions it is proposed to supply answers in this paper.

The “Eastward Position” means a bodily position used by certain clergymen at the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, during the act of consecrating the elements of bread and wine. These clergymen perform this act of consecration standing in front of the communion table, turning their backs towards the congregation (so that the people cannot see what they are doing) and turning their faces towards the East. Hence it is called the “Eastward Position.”

Now, is this “Eastward Position,” as many say, a matter of indifference? Is it one of those points about which every clergyman may be allowed to do what he likes? Is it a mere trifle which does not signify and may be sanctioned without harm? It is nothing of the kind. It is a point of vast importance. Let us see.

The harm of the “Eastward Position” consists in this, that it is the outward and visible sign of an unscriptural, mischievous, and soul-injuring doctrine. That doctrine is nothing less than this, that the Lord’s Supper is a proper sacrifice—that the officiating clergyman is a sacrificing priest—that the communion table is an altar—and that in the act of consecration some mysterious change takes place in the bread and wine. All this, and nothing less than this, lies at the bottom of the “Eastward Position.” It is, to speak plainly, a step toward the Romish Sacrifices of the Mass, which the Thirty-first Article of the Church of England declares to be “blasphemous fables and dangerous deceits.” It is in an action which pours contempt on the finished sacrifice of Christ.

It may be freely admitted that many English clergymen have always used the “Eastward Position” in the Lord’s Supper without the slightest wrong intention. They have used it in simplicity, and for convenience’ sake, and meant no harm. There are hundreds, on the other hand, it may be feared, who are using it as the symbol of a doctrine which they want to maintain and spread, but which ought to be resisted by all faithful Churchmen. The following extracts from a Ritualistic Catechism, *The Ritual Reason Why*, supply abundant proof that there is ground for saying this—they speak for themselves:—

“1. *What is Ritual?* It is the employment of symbols in Divine Worship according to a recognised or traditional system.

“2. *To what end are symbols thus employed?* Partly to uphold the dignity of Divine worship and partly to shadow forth by outward deed and gesture certain truths which might otherwise be lost sight of.

“301. . . . *Explain in general why in the greater part of the celebration (of the Holy Communion) he (the priest) keeps his back to the people?* This was also the position of the Jewish Priest, who ministered ‘before the Lord,’ at the Altar of Incense, and at the table of shew-bread, *i.e.*, facing the hidden mercy-seat beyond. As to the position being observed in this place it is sufficient to say that

the Priest being [engaged in an act of Ministry before the Lord, although in the presence and on behalf of the people,] he only turns from the Altar for some weighty cause and in direct addresses to the flock.

“345. *Why is the Priest to say it (the Prayer of Consecration) ‘standing before the’ Altar?* Because this is the position of a Sacrificing Priest.

“340. *What is the prayer which the priest says kneeling at the midst of the Altar?* It is a humble acknowledgment of his own unworthiness to execute the ministry which he is about to perform, and of that of the communicants to join with him in the sacrifice by feasting on the Sacred Victim who is now about to be offered.”— *Ritual Reason Why*, p. 136.

Dr. Pusey says: “The standing before the Altar, means the primitive doctrine of the Eucharistic Sacrifice, and the bowing after the Sarum Use at the consecration means Eucharistic adoration.”— *Extract from speech at St. James’s Hall. Church Review*, June, 1874.

All Englishmen who desire the peace and prosperity of the Reformed Church of England have now a plain duty before them in the present day. They ought to resist any attempt to sanction the “Eastward Position” in the worship of the Established Church, by whomsoever it may be made, and from whatever quarter it may proceed. They ought to know that a strong effort is likely to be made in Convocation to obtain a Report to Parliament (under the recent Letter of Business for the Revision of Rubrics) recommending that the Prayer Book rubrics should be so altered as to permit the “Eastward Position” being used. To prevent such a Report being made and to resist its adoption by Parliament, if it is made, should be the aim and endeavour of every faithful Protestant Churchman.

Once, for all, let the following points be impressed on our minds:—

1. The “Eastward Position” is utterly without warrant of Scripture. The four accounts of the institution of the Lord’s Supper, written by St. Matthew, St. Mark, St. Luke and St. Paul, do not say one word to favour it. Any plain, impartial, unprejudiced man, reading the simple narrative of the New Testament for the first time, would say unhesitatingly that whatever our blessed Lord did, when He broke the bread and gave the cup, was done before, under the eyes, and in full view of, the whole congregation of the Apostles. Why are clergymen to appear to make a mystery where our Lord made none?

2. The “Eastward Position” is utterly without warrant of the Prayer Book, fairly and reasonably interpreted. The Communion Office nowhere calls the Lord’s Supper a sacrifice, and nowhere calls the Lord’s table an altar. The rubric which regulates and directs the minister’s position, in the act of consecrating the bread and wine, distinctly says that he should “break the bread and take the cup into his hand *before the people*.” If “before the people” can be twisted into meaning “with his back to the people,” there really is no meaning in words! The rubric, moreover, on this point, is the more remarkable, because it *first* directs the minister to “stand before the table,” and “order the bread and wine,” so that he may afterwards do what he does “with readiness and decency.” But, after he has ordered, or put in proper position, the elements, he is to perform the act of consecration “before the people”—that is, standing in such a position that all can see what he does.

To prevent doubt, and to prove that this explanation is not modern and newly invented, let us hear what Professors Blunt and Wheatley, no mean authorities, say on this subject of this sadly misunderstood rubric.

BLUNT says: “This rubric, again, has ministered cause of debate. ‘The priest, standing *before the table*,’ you will take notice, is a different phrase from standing at the *north side of the table*,’ and implies a different thing—viz., that he shall stand up in front of the table, with his back to the

people, till he has '*ordered*' the elements, and prepared them for the rite, interposing his person between the congregation and the table, till whatever is merely *mechanical* in the act shall have been completed, the Church not wishing to make the meaner part of the service a spectacle.

"This done, he returns to the north side, and breaks the bread, and takes the cup 'before the people,' *i.e., in their sight*—the Church not wishing to make the manner of consecration, as the Romish priest does, a mystery. Thus the former position was merely taken up in order to the subsequent act, that the priest '*may, with the more readiness and decency, break the bread.*' So that they mistake this rubric altogether, I apprehend, and violate both its letter and spirit, who *consecrate* the elements with their backs to the people, after the manner of the Church of Rome. All that they have to do in that position is to *order* the elements, so that they *may* afterwards break the bread and take the cup with more decency."—BLUNT, *Lectures on the Duties of the Parish Priest*. Sixth edition, p. 333.

WHEATLEY says: "If it be asked whether the priest is to say the Prayer of Consecration standing before the table, or at the north end of it; I answer, at the north end of it: for according to the rules of grammar, the participle *standing* must refer to the verb *ordered*, and not to the verb *say*. So that whilst the priest is *ordering the bread and wine*, he is to stand before the table: but when he says the prayer, he is to stand so as *that he may with the more readiness and decency break the bread before the people*, which must be on the north side. For if he stood *before* the table, his body would hinder the people from seeing: so that he must not stand there: and consequently he must stand on the north side; there being, in our present rubric, no other place mentioned for performing any part of this Office. In the Romish Church indeed they always stand *before* the altar during the time of consecration; in order to prevent the people from being eye-witnesses of their operation in working their pretended miracle: and in the Greek Church they shut the chancel door, or at least draw a veil or curtain before it, I suppose, upon the same account. But our Church, that pretends no such miracle, enjoins, we see, the direct contrary to this, by ordering the priest so *to order the bread and wine, that he may with the more readiness and decency break the bread, and take the cup into his hands before the people*. And with this view, it is probable, the Scotch liturgy ordered, that *during the time of consecration the presbyter should stand at such a part of the holy table, where he may with the more ease and decency use both his hands.*"—Wheatley on the *Common Prayer*. Tegg's edition, p. 296, 1845.

3. Last, but not least, the "Eastward Position" is a direct step towards Popery. Whether its friends and advocates like to admit this or not, it is a simple matter of fact. It is a retrograde movement towards that unscriptural and superstitious system of religion which our martyred reformers resisted to the death. It is a departure from the Protestant principles on which the Church of England was established three centuries ago, and which have been her strength, her glory, and her beauty. If we value an open Bible, a free Gospel, and a deliverance from priestcraft, let us resolve never to consent to the sanction of the "Eastward Position" in the Church of England, and let us use every lawful means to prevent it.