

Bishop Bull and the "defensio fidei nicenæ"

Autor(en): **Joyce, G.C.**

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BISHOP BULL

AND

THE “DEFENSIO FIDEI NICENÆ”.

It was a stormy period of English history, when George Bull was born, in the year 1634. The shock of the Reformation in the preceding century had not passed away without leaving behind it a legacy of political and religious unrest. Rebellion, civil war and revolution are the distinguishing characteristics of the time. The startling changes and rapid developments of public events form the dark background, against which stands out in sharp contrast the story of the life of a country clergyman, engaged in the quiet round of parochial duties, and devoting himself with unswerving industry to his studies. The outward circumstances of his life are so simple as to require but little notice. He was early left an orphan, but inherited from his father means sufficient to insure him as good an education as could in those days be provided. According to the fashion of the times he was no more than a lad of fourteen years of age, when he became a student at Exeter College, Oxford. His course at the University was however soon brought to a premature close. For the next year, following the example of his tutor, he refused to submit to the conditions, which the victorious Parliament sought to impose upon all members of the University. Rather than accept the so-called “Engagement”, the oath of fealty to the Commonwealth, he left Oxford, and together with a little company of fellow students retired to a country village, where for some years he applied himself diligently to his books, and laid the foundation of that learning for which he afterwards became famous. It would seem as

though his boyish character had been sobered and steadied by the necessity for this decision. Young as he was, he showed considerable independence of thought, and although brought for a time under Puritan influences, preferred to follow the guidance to be found in the works of such standard English divines, as Hooker, Hammond and Jeremy Taylor.

In those days the hand of the oppressor rested heavily upon the Church of England. Her revenues had been confiscated, her ministers expelled from their benefices, her sacraments forbidden and her altars desecrated. The usurping Government would extend no toleration to the Church, which had allied herself with the party of the King. Not only were her public services prohibited, but even the private use of the Book of Common Prayer was declared to be illegal. The very name of Episcopacy was odious to the dominant party in the state. For all that the Church was not driven from the field, and Episcopal acts continued to be performed, in spite of the penalties pronounced against them. Yet under circumstances such as these it is not surprising that Canonical rules were relaxed; and George Bull had only reached the age of twenty-one years, when he was ordained deacon and priest on the same day by Dr Skinner, the ejected bishop of Oxford.

After ordination he proceeded to take charge of the small parish of St. George's near Bristol, where he proved himself to be a diligent and efficient parish priest. Many a student has found it impossible to combine regular study with the faithful discharge of parochial duties, even in a small cure. It was far otherwise in this case. Without in any way neglecting the spiritual interests of his parishioners he continued to read widely and thoroughly, while a tenacious memory and the methodical habits of a careful student enabled him in after years to make good use of the material thus amassed. Naturally enough his own stock of books was limited, but an annual visit to Oxford gave him access to libraries sufficient for his needs.

After a few years passed at St. George's he moved to Suddington, and here composed his first work the "*Harmonia Apostolica*", published in 1669. The book dealt with one of the burning questions of the day, the Doctrine of Justification, and was a simple and straight-forward protest against those exaggerations and distortions of the doctrine of the Epistle to the

Romans, which had become unhappily prevalent in England during the recent period of confusion. Unknown as the author was, his work provoked considerable comment, and exposed him to a good deal of acrid criticism from the opposite party. By nature he was no controversialist, and yet as has happened with other writers before and since, it was controversy which impelled him to produce his most important work, the *Defensio Fidei Nicenæ*.

So great was the influence of this book at the time, so well has it since vindicated its right to be considered a work of more than mere antiquarian interest, so characteristic is it still of Anglican churchmanship, that it may well merit the attention of those who wish to understand the position taken up by the English Church on emerging from the troubles of the seventeenth century. Although completed in the year 1680 it was not printed till five years later, when difficulties with regard to the expense of publication, which had been hitherto an obstacle, were surmounted through the assistance of Dr Fell, the bishop of Oxford.

For a quarter of a century the English Church had been restored to her ancient rights and privileges. She was no longer exposed to the open attacks of resentful enemies; but at the same time to one, who looked beneath the surface, there were not lacking reasons for serious uneasiness. It seemed as though in many quarters doubt and unsettlement with regard to the most fundamental doctrines of the faith were on the increase. The Socinians were carrying on an active propaganda, and accusations of Socinianism were recklessly bandied about. Bull himself had been called a Socinian by some of those who disapproved of the line which he had taken in the "*Harmonia Apostolica*", and it was partly to defend himself against this charge that he composed the "*Defensio*".

Before proceeding to give any account of the book, it will be as well briefly to notice two works, to which constant reference is made almost from the first page to the last; viz. the "*De Trinitate*" of Petavius, and the "*Nucleus Historiæ Ecclesiasticæ*" of Sandius. Strangely enough these two writers while belonging to opposite camps, and owning allegiance to very different principles, yet exhibited no small degree of agreement in one particular. They were both inclined to impugn the or-

thodoxy of the Ante-Nicene Christian Fathers. Petavius, the Jesuit, endeavoured to discredit the appeal to antiquity by claiming to show that many of the early Christian Fathers had held erroneous opinions upon such an all-important matter as the divinity of Jesus Christ. Sandius, himself holding Arian views, sought to prove that Arianism, so far from being an heretical innovation, was actually the original creed of the Church, the consistent teaching of the earliest Christian writers. Thus the position, of which Bull undertook the defence, had been attacked on both sides, by Romanist and Arian. With a simple earnestness and a single-minded devotion to the interests of truth he set about his difficult task: the gratitude of succeeding generations has been ample testimony to the success with which he carried it through. His own estimate of the value of his work, produced under unfavourable conditions, is marked by genuine modesty.

“You have here all that it was in my power to do, a man of moderate ability and learning, the possessor of a limited store of books, in poor health, hindered by domestic cares, and whilst writing this work tied to the cure of souls in a country parish, and lastly living far from the society of learned men, an exile as it were from the literary world.”¹⁾

Modest he certainly was, and yet there is no hesitation about the way in which he lays claim to one great merit, that of scrupulous honesty.

“Not a passage have I adduced from primitive antiquity in support of the decision of the Council of Nice, which after a careful examination both of the passage itself and of its context, I did not seriously think really made for the cause which we are maintaining; not a passage have I garbled, but put before you all entire Of those passages which the modern defenders of Arianism have adduced from the ancient authors in support of it, I have not knowingly or designedly kept back any; nor have I ever attempted any how to salve over the harder sayings of the ancients by cunning artifices, but have endeavoured by observing the drift and purpose of

¹⁾ D. F. N. *Ad Lectorem*. Works, V, p. VIII, Oxford, 1846. Here and elsewhere I have quoted from the translation published in the *Library of Anglo-Catholic Theology*. Oxford, 1851.

each author, and by adducing other clearer statements from their several writings to establish on solid grounds that they not only admit but require to be understood in a catholic sense.”¹⁾

It is no idle boast. He never argues merely for the sake of a logical victory: he never seeks to shirk a difficulty by evading instead of meeting it. Any tampering with the truth in a matter of such vital importance is abhorrent to his nature. He is as careful to avoid the fault himself, as he is unsparing in his denunciation of it in others. Indeed it is instructive in this connection to observe how different a treatment he accords to his two opponents, Petavius and Sandius. So ready had Petavius been to assail the orthodoxy of the early fathers on the question of the divinity of Christ that Arians like Sandius had claimed him as an ally. To Bull’s judgement another explanation of his attitude commended itself.

“If indeed it must be said that Petavius wrote thus with any sinister purpose, and not merely from that bold and careless temper which is his wont in criticising and commenting on the holy fathers, I should say that, being a Jesuit, he wished to promote the Papal rather than the Arian interest. For assuming it to be the fact (as Petavius contends) that almost all the catholic doctors of the first three centuries fell into the selfsame error, which the Nicene Council afterwards condemned as heresy in the case of Arius, these two things will easily follow. (1) That little authority is to be assigned to the Fathers of the first three centuries, to whom Reformed Catholics are wont to make their chief appeal. (2) That Œcumenical Councils have the power of framing or, as Petavius says, of settling and developing new articles of faith, by which principle it may seem that sufficient provision is made for those additions which the fathers of Trent patched on to the rule of faith.”²⁾

Evidently Bull was not blind to the bias which mars the work of Petavius, yet considering the controversial methods commonly practised in the seventeenth century, he may be said to observe a respectful tone in his allusions to this author. Not so when he has to deal with Sandius. On more than one occa-

¹⁾ Ibid., p. ix.

²⁾ D. F. N. Procem. § 8.

sion he gives free vent to his indignation, exposing what he holds to be the trickery and dishonesty of this champion of Arianism. He calls him trifler and sophist, and surely not without sufficient cause; for a controversialist who attempts to dispose of inconvenient evidence by a free use of the charge of forgery, can scarcely be considered to deserve milder treatment. ¹⁾

When the appeal to antiquity was thus in danger of being discredited, Bull came forward as the defender of this principle of Reformed Catholicism. The method, he maintains in effect, is sound and practicable, but has been misused and misapplied alike by Jesuit and Arian. Reference to the testimony of the early fathers, as conducted by Petavius, may land the enquirer in mere hesitation and uncertainty; as conducted by Sandius, in Arianism: but the calamitous result is in either case due not to any radical imperfection in the method, but to its misapplication and misuse.

The arrangement of the book is simple, and although entailing a certain amount of repetition and making no small demand upon the diligent attention of the reader has the great merits of clearness and directness. The author undertakes to prove that the early Christian writers agreed with the Nicene and post-Nicene fathers in holding the true divinity of Christ, involving (1) His preexistence, (2) His consubstantiality with God the Father, (3) His coeternity, (4) His subordination as Son to the Father. To us, who are perhaps inclined to assume the orthodoxy of the Early Fathers, it may seem as though this minute examination of a multitude of passages, this amassing of quotations from each several author were carried to an unnecessary length; but it should be remembered that Bull, so far from wasting his energies in proving the obvious, was engaged in defending a position, which had been recently subjected to a vigorous attack. It would be obviously impossible within the limits of an article to follow him in his careful and critical review of the language of the Christian writers of the first three centuries; but it is at once possible and instructive to observe how he deals with certain questions, that are not less important to-day than they were two centuries ago.

¹⁾ Ibid., IV, ii, § 4.

For example the course of the argument illustrates his attitude towards the authority of General Councils. As his intimate friend and biographer, R. Nelson, has put it, he held a middle position between that of the foreign protestants and that of the Romanists. "He thought Episcopius and Curcellæus attributed too little, and Petavius and others of his Church too much to the power and authority of ecclesiastical synods, for the declaring of articles of faith." ¹⁾ Bossuet who in his *Histoire des Variations des Eglises protestantes*, XV, § CIII ²⁾, cites him as a believer in the infallibility of General Councils, has somewhat misunderstood the English writer's position. He does not assume as a dogma the immunity of the Nicene Council from error, but sets forth in his work the proof, that as a matter of fact it did not err. Having urged that, considering the circumstances under which the bishops met at Nicæa, it was morally impossible for them to be mistaken in so fundamental a matter, he proceeds to show that their decision is actually in close conformity with the testimonies of earlier times. Consequently the sentence of the Council should produce in the mind of any one professing to recognize the authority of Jesus Christ a strong conviction in favour of the doctrine then and there defined. The verdict of a General Council is not *ipso facto* superior to criticism. Succeeding generations have the right to test that verdict by the evidence of still earlier times; yet of all the means whereby we can determine what was the real teaching of the early church, none is in itself more important or more trustworthy than the verdict of a General Council. Such a decision is the result of discussion among representatives of the Church gathered together from different quarters. Those who frame it, and those who accept it are alike controlled by a strong sense of responsibility, and in the discharge of their duty are privileged to count upon the assistance of the Holy Spirit. Cf. *Def. Fid. Nic. Procem.*, §§ 2, 3. It will be seen that we have here no mechanical and rigid theory of the infallibility of General Councils, but a profound and reasoned deference to their authority as primary witnesses to the Catholic tradition.

¹⁾ *Life of Dr Bull*, by Nelson. Oxford, 1816. p. 235.

²⁾ *Œuvres*. Paris, 1836. VI, 158.

Very similar is the position which he takes up in relation to the authority of the fathers regarding the interpretation of Holy Scripture. It cannot be better illustrated than by a quotation.

“I have”, he says, “and always shall have a religious scruple in interpreting the Holy Scriptures against the stream of all the fathers and ancient doctors, except when the most evident proofs compel me to do so. This however I do not believe will ever happen. For certainly the consentient judgement of antiquity, especially of primitive antiquity, ought to outweigh the force of many probabilities and reasonings from likelihood.”¹⁾

Both in England and abroad there was a ready recognition of the great merit of the “Defensio”. The attention of those in authority was drawn to one capable of doing such good service to the Church. He was preferred by the Archbishop of Canterbury to the Archdeaconry of Llandaff; while his old university showed its appreciation of his learning by conferring upon him the degree of Doctor of Divinity.

In 1694 D^r Bull issued what is in fact an appendix to the “Defensio”, entitled *Judicium Ecclesiæ Catholicæ*. In this work he traversed the position of those advocates of latitudinarian comprehension, who maintained that in the early Church the Divinity of our Lord was left an open question. D^r Bull, following the method adopted in his former work, proved that from the first the acceptance of this tenet was regarded as an indispensable condition of communion. It so happened that the book was brought under the notice of Bp. Bossuet, while he was attending a synod of the French Church at St. Germain en Laye. In his letter to M^r R. Nelson, from whom he had received the book, occurs the following interesting passage.

“Quant à l’ouvrage du Docteur Bullus j’ay voulu le lire entier avant que de vous en accuser la reception; afin de vous en dire mon sentiment. Il est admirable, et la matière qu’il traite ne pouvoit estre expliquée plus savamment et plus à fond. C’est ce que je vous supplie de vouloir bien luy faire savoir, et en mesme temps les sinceres congratulations de tout le clergé de France assemblé en cette ville pour le service qu’il rend a

¹⁾ D. F. N. I, 1, § 9.

l'Eglise Catholique, en defendant si bien le jugement qu'elle a porté sur la necessité de croire la divinité du Fils de Dieu. Qu'il me soit permis de luy dire qu'il me reste un seul sujet d'etonnement. C'est qu'un si grand homme, qui parle si bien de l'Eglise, du salut que l'on ne trouve qu'en son unité, et de l'assistance infaillible du St. Esprit dans le Concile de Nice, ce qui induit la mesme grace pour tous les autres assemblez dans la mesme Eglise puisse demeurer un seul moment sans la reconnoistre. Ou bien, Monsieur, qu'il daigne me dire, comme à un zélé defenseur de la doctrine qu'il enseigne, ce que c'est donc qu'il entend par ce mot Eglise Catholique? Estce l'Eglise Romaine et celles qui luy adherent? Estce l'Eglise Anglicane? Estce un amas confus de societez separées les unes des autres? Et comment peuvent elles estre ce royaume de J. C. non divisé en luy mesme, et qui aussi ne doit jamais perir?"¹⁾

Bull did not shrink from taking up the challenge conveyed in such kindly language by the great French Bishop. In a work named "The corruptions of the Church of Rome", he stated his reasons for holding aloof from the Roman Communion; but Bossuet did not live long enough to receive this answer to his queries.

Bull himself was now advancing in years. In 1705 he was consecrated Bishop of S. David's, but the infirmities of age debarred him from showing much activity in the discharge of his episcopal duties; and after a brief episcopate of five years he died at the age of seventy-six. It is as a student not as an administrator that he won and retains his reputation. In his work there is no meretricious glitter: it is like the man himself, simple, straightforward, painstaking and honest. But these virtues it possesses in such a degree, that George Bull deserves to be reckoned no unworthy successor of those great divines, by whose learning and piety the earlier part of the seventeenth century was rendered illustrious.

Hawarden.

G. C. JOYCE.

¹⁾ Life by Nelson, p. 310.