

## ARTICLE IV.

## THE HISTORY OF "EXTREME UNCTION."

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THE rite known as "Extreme Unction" in the Roman Church, and reckoned there as a sacrament, among four others, to which the Reformed churches deny that title, has a singularly intermittent history. Before tracing the scanty evidence of the earlier centuries, and the comparative abundance of evidence in later ages concerning it, some few remarks on the two passages of the New Testament with which it is in theory connected, may be serviceable.

St. Mark vi. 12, 13, records briefly the first mission of the twelve. The verbs are noticeably in the imperfect tense, as of a sustained course of action, i. e. they kept on from time to time, as occasion offered, "the anointing of the sick with oil and (so) healing them." It is noteworthy that the same evangelist (in the disputed final passage, however, xvi. 18) records, among the signs promised to "follow them that believed," "that they shall lay hands on the sick (*ἀρρώστους*, as in vi. 13) and they shall recover." There is no recorded use of oil by the Lord himself. St. Mark records his laying his hands on the sick (vi. 5), and their touching the hem of his garment (ver. 56). Some have thought that he enjoined the use of the oil by the twelve. But probably its general Jewish use as a therapeutic agent is the more natural ground of its use by them. The unfailling effect of recovering the sick, and probably its instantaneousness and thus evident character, were the proofs of supernatural power. From the

next quotation from St. James, as also from the practice of the apostles, when fully commissioned after the Pentecost, it is presumable that the name of the Lord Jesus was used by the twelve in their earlier exercise of the gift. For St. James says (v. 14-16): "Is any sick among you? let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith shall save the sick; and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him. Confess your sins one to another, and pray for one another, that ye may be healed: the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much."

Here, again, it seems as plain as in the record of St. Mark given above, that the "saving" of the sick means their rescue from bodily sickness, and the "raising up," their restoration to health. The use of the word *σώζω* by our Lord, as in the phrase "Thy faith hath saved thee" (sometimes in A. V. variably rendered "hath made thee whole"), is too well known to need citation. Nor is that of *ἐγείρω* less clearly established, as used by St. James here, by Matt. ix. 5, 6; Mark ix. 27; John v. 8; Acts iii. 6, 7; although frequently used also of raising from the dead, and rousing from sleep. It is, however, noteworthy that most stress is by St. James laid upon prayer. The prayer is that of "the elders," who represent "the church;" it is to be directed "over him" (*ἐπ' αὐτόν*, note the case, not *αὐτῷ*), which may probably have been made more express by laying hands on the patient, according to Mark xvi. 18, as above. St. James, then, conditions it fur-

the last word (*ἰάθητε*) carries forward the same idea as *σώζω* and *ἐγείρω* in verse 15. And thus the "anointing with oil," while it follows the apostolic precedent of the first missionary twelve, is at the same time a compliance with and sanction given to a therapeutic custom, as noted above, of much wider currency than the infant church would then represent. That church had witnessed the ministry in Jerusalem both of St. Peter, who would naturally remember and retain the practice which he had shared, and also of St. Mark, who records it. This leads us to feel sure that St. James was merely reinforcing by his precept an usage already well known in the Church of the Circumcision, of which he appears in the Acts as the apostolic bishop (xv. 13, 19; xxi. 18; cf. Gal. i. 17; ii. 9).<sup>1</sup> The "unction" then seems regarded as rather instrumental and secondary, and faith and prayer as the primary medium through which the desired end was to be wrought.

Nor should we fail to notice by the way, the interweaving of the higher, spiritual blessing with the bodily cure. This is exactly in our Lord's own method, as shown in the example of the paralytic, to whom his first words are, "Son, thy sins are forgiven thee" (Matt. ix. 2). He saw, as it were, through the body's needs into the deeper needs of the soul. St. James, in refusing to separate them, follows the Master's lead. Given "faith" and the "effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man," embodied on behalf of the whole "church" in its official heads "the elders," and the result is at once physical and spiritual. And thus the precept expands into the treatment of the sick man *as a whole*, not a fragmentary, being. For indeed no less is the scope and range of that "faith" which is the vital essence of prayer. It is the gift of that Spirit which "searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God," and therefore penetrates to all that is within the man. The bearing of these remarks will be seen further when we come to consider the mediæval and modern usage founded upon this apostolic "unction."

<sup>1</sup> Euseb., Hist. Eccl., § 44, 12-15.

Some commentators have thought fit to distinguish "miraculous faith," as though a thing *sui generis*, from that which opens the door of the human soul to God, and which is "counted for righteousness." To discuss fully such a question here would lead us too far from our subject. But it may be remarked in general, that our Lord seems to contemplate *one* kind of faith only. The well-known words spoken to or by, not the apostles only, but others who fell in the way of His mercy; as the Jewish afflicted father, the Syrophœnician anxious mother, the Gentile centurion, and others, all seem to ring a single note, not to involve or distinguish a higher and a lower tone. Such are, "Where is your faith?" "Have faith in God," "If ye had faith as a grain of mustard seed," etc. Again, "Lord, increase our faith," "If thou canst believe," "Lord, I believe, help thou mine unbelief," "O woman, great is thy faith," "I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel,"—all too well known to call for references here. And it may be further questioned, whether the distinction of "miraculous" from other faith is not an afterthought of commentators, founded on the assumed fact that miracles have ceased, and on the demand for a theory to account for the cessation. With these remarks I must let the question stand aside. It may, however, be admitted that the *degree* of faith in both healer and healed, conditions the result.

We know that the personal influence of St. James was great among his countrymen, and Eusebius cites Clement and Hegesippus<sup>1</sup> as attesting the fact. He wrote, in fact, "to the Twelve Tribes of the Dispersion."<sup>2</sup> But his utterances in his Epistle cannot be viewed as exclusively directed to the Jewish or to any section of the early church. The same

that wide repertory given "for the edification of the body of Christ," among the Gentile Christians. Further, the object of apostolic ordinances being assumed to be the binding *all* believers together in one brotherhood, so that there should be in Christ "neither Jew nor Gentile," to provide any such ordinance for the use of Hebrew or proselyte Christians *only*, would surely tend to loosen that comprehensive bond, and continue that exclusiveness which Judaism had fostered. Nor is the wide and free action of the Spirit, as described by St. Paul, "dividing to every man severally as he will," irrespectively of ecclesiastical *status*, inconsistent with the assumption which underlies St. James' words that some, at any rate, of the "elders" would be found qualified with this special "gift of healing." Or, setting such special gifts to individuals aside, his words may be taken as a direction how, in case of need, to seek for such gifts, and as an assurance that "those who sought" should "find" them, in the due exercise of their ministry, "in the name of the Lord." Further, it is supposable that, as the head, under Christ, of the Church of the Circumcision, he might have personal knowledge of the "elders" among the communities of the Dispersion, whether forming distinct local churches or grouped therein with Gentile brethren. This personal intimacy may possibly have guided his words as regards their application at the moment. How long they would continue applicable, depends on the wider general question, How long the whole class of supernatural gifts in the physical sphere continued to mark the progress of the Christian church. And here it is further to be noticed, that mutual confession of offences is coupled with mutual intercession, both being exercises of the same spirit of love, as though equally conditions of the gift. In short, its exercise needs an atmosphere of charity. Perhaps it is not too much to say that in that atmosphere only can it flourish. Thus we have love coupled with faith as prerequisites. And this may possibly suggest an answer to the

above question as to the duration of this whole class of gifts. Not only by faith becoming mere otiose assent to formal propositions, but by "love waxing cold," would their vital atmosphere degenerate, and they themselves tend to die out. But on this debatable question we need not now further dwell; and pass on to the witness of the earlier post-apostolic ages.

We search the Apostolic Fathers in vain for any trace of the practice as prescribed by St. James, or any reference to his words. The "Teaching of the Twelve Appostles," lately exhumed by Bryennius the Patriarch from the mausoleum of the past, is equally void of any such trace, although largely tintured with a tone derived from that early period, when the Church of the Circumcision was a distinct and important factor in Christianity. The first notices which meet us of a kindred import seem to found themselves upon the text of St. Mark rather than on that of St. James. Thus Tertullian<sup>1</sup> relates of the Emperor Septimius Severus that he was healed of a disease by the anointing of a Christian, one Proculus, for all that appears, a layman. This must have been before 211 A. D. Tertullian, having been born about 150 A. D., is thus a contemporary witness. The next case is that of the healing of a woman by a woman, similarly by unction of oil, the healer being named Eugenia, somewhere in the third century. The next is recorded by the historian Sozomen, a great admirer of saintly anchorites, who says of Benjamin, one of that class, probably late in the fourth century, who dwelt at Sectis, "that to him God gave such grace that without medicine, by mere touch of hand, or by use of oil, over which he used to pray, he cured the sick" in apostolic fashion. Here it should be noted that we have oil

evidence in these cases as regards the fact itself. But at any rate they attest the belief, as current from the second century downward, that the gift of healing by the use of oil was persistent in the church; and they seem to incline to the view that the power was a special gift to some person of holy character, without reference to official *status*.

Next, it may be noticed that parallel with these recorded or alleged facts, runs a rather scanty *catena* of patristic passages in which the text, as above, from St. James, or a part of it, is quoted; but in which it seems adduced *not* in reference to any rite then current and founded upon it, but merely to illustrate the pastoral office in respect of the remission of sins. Thus Origen, in a "Homily on Leviticus," says: "There is yet a hard and painful remission of sins through penance, when the sinner washes his couch with tears, etc., and when he is not ashamed to declare his sin to God's priests, and seek his cure." It will be observed that the connection of remission of sins with official absolution is the subject here. Then follows immediately, "wherein also is fulfilled that which the apostle [St. James] saith, 'But if a man is sick, let him call,' etc." Obviously the purpose of Origen here had no connection with any use of unction, save the accidental one of its being united in the same passage. The whole force of what he quotes, lies, for his purpose, in the words relating to confession, to sin, and to forgiveness through the agency of the church's officers.

Chrysostom<sup>1</sup> again says, "For not only when they regenerate us, but also afterwards, they [priests] have power to remit sins, for, 'Is any man sick among you? let him call,' etc." Here the same remarks apply as to the words of Origen above. Victor of Antioch (c. 401 A. D.), commenting on Mark vi. 13, introduces our passage from St. James, just as a modern commentator might, to illustrate it; but this purely hermeneutic reference has obviously no bearing whatever on

<sup>1</sup> De Sacerdotio, iii.

any *rite* as practised in the church: it is merely an explaining of Scripture by Scripture. Cyril of Alexandria<sup>1</sup> (c. 449 A. D.) quotes the passage from St. James among many others bearing on his subject; the special reference, if any, being to intercession as an element of worship.

So far, then, we have bare citations of St. James' text, with no suggestion of any ritual practice founded upon it. Our next authority, however, *does* seem to suggest some such practice in connection with it.

Among Augustine's "works" of doubtful genuineness is the Sermon ccxv., "De Tempore," now ascribed by many to Cæsarius of Arles of the early sixth century. In it occurs the passage, "As often as any infirmity occurs, let the sick man receive the body and blood of Christ, and then let him anoint his body, that what is written may be fulfilled in him, 'If any man is sick, let him call,' etc." Here it seems almost certain that some error, either of author or transcriber, has established a corrupt text: for how could "what is written be fulfilled" by a patient thus self-anointed? All the tradition of the exercise of the power of cure by oil is against such a self-application of it. Moreover, as he could not communicate himself, but must be indebted to the clergy for that, why should he be left to transgress the rule of St. James exactly in the point which the author presently quotes St. James to enforce? Both textually and practically, therefore, the notion seems absurd. But, of course, the building on a single corrupt passage in a comparatively late writer, is the most unsound of all argumentative structures. It is giving the "Extreme Unctionist" the benefit of the gravest of critical doubts, to admit that even here, in a sermon of no certain authority in the early sixth century, we touch bottom at last on an isolated shoal of tradition in his favor. And this

by oil as a *fact*, specially vouchsafed to some person of eminent holiness. The two *catenae* of testimonies have, as we have seen, nothing in common. It is impossible so to correlate them as to marshal them in support of one another. It is only in this last and doubtful link of the second *catena* that any stretch of critical ingenuity can detect even a convergence; and this link is separated by too wide a chronological gap for any argumentative contact to be possible.

But I have reserved for special remark a letter from Innocent I. (Pope, 411-417 A. D.) to one Decentius, a bishop, who had asked, whether the sick might be anointed with oil, and whether the bishop might anoint. The pope replies in the affirmative to both queries, and quotes St. James as in support of his decision. But how is it possible that the question could have been asked, if there had been, as the unctionists allege, a continuous tradition and practice of the sacramental or other rite of unction from primitive times? The letter is absolutely decisive *against*, and not for, any such rite so deduced. The rite assumes to be (1) sacramental, (2) exercised by presbyters, (3) deduced by tradition from St. James. How could a bishop of the church fail to know of one of its sacraments? How could he ask whether a bishop could officiate, if it were (as on the theory it must have been) open all along to presbyters to do so? How could a pope fail to remind him that it had existed from the beginning, if the fact were so? How could he answer in this timid and tentative way, unless the practice had been a somewhat questionable novelty? What should we think of a contemporaneous papal rescript, answering, "Yes; water may be used in baptism, and a deacon may apply it"? Yet, how is this reply more absurd, on the Romish theory, than the other?

But, adds Innocent, "The oil being made by the bishop, not only priests, but all Christians, may use it for anointing, as their own or their friends' necessity may require." Here,

then, we have a hint of an entire deviation from the earlier tradition. The essential sanctity is now derived from the bishop, but transferred to the oil, which becomes, as it were, the *res sacramenti*, and conveys the miraculous virtue which any Christian can apply. The personal holiness which was the apparent basis of earlier tradition as to the fact of cure, becomes materialized in the unguent. In short, all the conditions which we traced as early prevailing, of vital faith, vital love, vital holiness, have vanished from this official manufactory of the unguent through episcopal benediction. It can be made in any required quantity, under this ecclesiastical patent, and kept ready on demand, to be a patent medicine at a druggist's store. A grosser degradation of an apostolic practice, it is not easy to conceive. Alban Butler indeed argued, or rather asserted, that the lay application of it is devotional only, and the clerical, alone sacramental. But there is no hint of this in the words of Pope Innocent, which are, as we have seen, inconsistent with the sacramental idea.

But, about the same time, or probably not earlier than the rescript of Pope Innocent I., the Eastern Church was bestirring itself in the same direction. We find a rule enjoined in the eighth book of the "Apostolical Constitutions," as follows: "Let the bishop bless the water or the oil. But if he be not present, then let the presbyter bless it, with the deacon standing by. But if the bishop be present, let the presbyter and the deacon stand by, and let him say: O Lord of hosts, the God of powers,<sup>1</sup> the creator of the waters, and the supplier of oil, who art compassionate and lovest mankind, who hast given water for drink and for cleansing, and oil to give

of him that hath offered them; and grant them power to restore health, to drive away diseases, to banish demons, and to disperse all snares through Christ our hope. [With doxology following.] Amen." The offerer then took home for use the water and the oil.<sup>1</sup> Similarly the earliest *ordo Romanus* (c. 730 A. D.) appoints on Maundy Thursday a form of benediction for the oil then to be offered, for the benefit of any sick, for whose domestic use it was then taken by the offerer.

Thus the earliest tradition concerning healing with oil makes it a spiritual gift, among other gifts of the Spirit himself indwelling in the man or woman, and seemingly dependent more or less on his or her conformity with the mind of the Spirit, i. e., on personal holiness. The latest relegates it to the sphere of official mechanism. Every bishop has an official holiness; "whatever he blesses, is blessed." Therefore this guarantees sufficiently the quality of the oil for all needful purposes. But we can even trace in outline the links of belief which lead us gradually from the one of these to the other. An eminent saint who, let us suppose, had been gifted with this power during life, lay a dying. Anxious that the gift should not wholly perish with him, the sorrowing relatives, etc., bring oil to him, to receive his parting benediction. They piously cherish in it the memory of his virtues, and recognize the efficacy of his spiritual presence. In it "he, being dead, yet speaketh;" and his works, in a literal sense, "do follow him" among the living still.

We realize these conditions, in fact, when we read what Gregory of Tours relates of the dying Monegund, "Oil and salt were brought to and blessed by her when dying, and

they retained healing virtue." Farther still, the growing warmth of veneration for relics, chiefly the personal remains, tombs, etc., of martyrs and saints, gave a strong secondary source to holy oil. It exuded from holy sepulchres, it distilled from holy bones, it was exhaled from monumental shrines anointed with common oil. Such reliquary oil, as Procopius relates, was obtained for the use of the Emperor Justinian, and cured him of a disease. Thus Augustine<sup>1</sup> relates even a restoration to life by the use of "the oil of St. Stephen," how obtained or prepared he does not say; and "knew a maiden of Hippo," from whom a living presbyter interceded that a devil might depart, and in his intercession his tears fell and mingled with oil, by anointing with which she was released. Here we have, indeed, a type truer to St. James' exemplar, in respect to the intercessory prayer of an "elder of the church;" and one which only stoops to the lower type in respect of the rather grotesque material machinery. Much more would the holy sites of gospel history be, we might expect, fruitful in the same virtue. The Chapel of the Nativity at Bethlehem and the (as believed) actual spots of the Cross and the Sepulchre, were requisitioned in the same cause and with the same result, says Paulinus Petrocorius (*c.* 460). Oil exposed there was believed to imbibe the sanctity of the shrine, and acquire healing virtue. Nay, it seems that in Chrysostom's time the faithful would abstract oil from the sanctuaries of the church, probably kept there for lamps, etc., and use it to anoint themselves, "in faith and in due season."<sup>2</sup> And so Elizius of Gaul<sup>3</sup> advises the sick to "faithfully seek the blessed oil from the church wherewith his body may be anointed;" meaning probably such oil as had by formal benediction

the early fourth to the late seventh century; and in none, save Augustine's "maiden of Hippo," does the intervention of the presbyter form a feature. We find, however, a solitary instance of this missing feature in the case of St. Chlotilde, who, in 554 A. D., *secundum Apostolum inuncta est sacerdotibus*. The two introductory words certainly give this the air of a revival of, or conscious recurrence to, a standard from which there had been an established deflection before; and thus the case makes against, rather than for, any continuity of tradition from the apostolic time. Further and later, in the eighth century, we have evidence of the Armenian rite, in which the presbyters are directed to "bless on each occasion so much oil as was needful for the sick, using proper prayers." What the words "on each occasion" mean, does not clearly appear. They may refer to "each occasion" of sickness, but also to any specially solemn function which drew a number of presbyters together, as a synod, or the like. Similarly, in the same century, Boniface, in the West, bids all presbyters have the *oleum infirmorum* blessed by the bishop, and to keep it by them. This brings us to the period of Pepin's ascendancy or near it, when the practice became more or less prevalent in Gaul (c. 744 A. D.); and seventy years later was, by a canon of Chalons (813 A. D.), formally enjoined on the Gallican clergy.

We see then, on reviewing these *data*, what we might be prepared to expect. The currency of Scripture in the church universal was wide enough to prevent the words of St. Mark and St. James from being ever wholly lost to its consciousness. Accordingly, we find a record of events, practices, and church rules, which have mostly some contact at some one point or more with that scriptural record. But as parallel development progressed, points of deflection were reached, earlier in one branch of the church, later in another, which, while they stopped somewhat short of one another, yet

were able in the eighth century to present something of a *consensus* of degenerate usage. The Armenian seems to diverge least widely from the norm of St. James, the Romish to go farthest in its departure, the Greek to keep somewhere between the two. This last does not erect its unction into a sacrament, as neither does the Armenian. The Romish, indeed, has undergone much further development since the simpler rule of Pepin's day, at the hands of Pope Innocent III., in the late twelfth century, of Pope Eugenius at the Council of Florence, and finally of the Council of Trent, and its defenders have no right now to found themselves even on the questionable amount of *consensus* which the eighth century exhibits. By enjoining the administration of "unction" only when recovery is hopeless, Rome cuts herself off similarly from a scriptural injunction having recovery for its special object. The church which went originally furthest in its departure from the norm, has expanded the abnormal form thus reached still farther, and since stereotyped, in the rigid lines of sacramental perpetuity, what is in effect an inversion, in its most essential point, of the apostolic rite. A form of anointing the sick was retained by the early Reformed Church of England in the first Prayer Book of King Edward VI. It was, however, merely to be used "if the sick person desired it," had no sacramental efficacy ascribed to it, but contained petitions alike for pardon of sins and restoration of body. Nor is there any reason why it should not have continued, or might not be with edification restored. And this leads us on to notice the revived pretensions of what is sometimes vulgarly called "Faith-healing"

of spiritual things, why the same "signs," or some of them, should not "follow them that believe" now as then.

Each case, however, must rest for its individual authentication upon its own evidence. And this mostly rests on minute details, impossible to sift or verify by personal research, and apart from it valueless. No such attempt will here be made. But one may here be allowed to refer to a single instance, resting on the evidence of no less a person than Canon Wilberforce, who says :—"I have no shadow of doubt that I was healed by the Lord's blessing upon his own word recorded in St. James. . . . . My internal ailment was of such a nature that leading surgeons declared it to be incurable except at the cost of a severe operation, which leading physicians thought me unable to endure at the time with safety. While endeavoring at the sea-side to gain strength for the operation, the passage in St. James was impressed with indescribable force upon my mind. I resisted it and reasoned with myself against it for two months. I even came up to London, and settled in a house near the eminent surgeon, that I might undergo the operation; but the spiritual pressure increased until I at last sent for elders,—men of God, full of faith,—by whom I was prayed over and anointed, and in a few weeks the internal ailment passed entirely away. 'This was the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in mine eyes.'"<sup>1</sup>

The present writer remembers citing the case to the attendant on a sick-bed at which he was then officiating; the suggestion was, however, declined. The initial difficulty in all such suggestions is to rise above the feeling that, in adopting it, one is trying an experiment—saying in effect, "Is the Lord among us, or not?" Such a question would never have occurred to the believer of St. James' days. It

way back, as it were, to the right hand of Christ himself, and realize that personal presence which should be as true now as ever, resting on the word of him who "liveth, and was dead, and is alive for evermore." And here, therefore, we recur to what was remarked above concerning the power, scope, and range of that faith which opens the soul to God. His Spirit is not impoverished, nor its power impaired, by the wear and waste of time. It runs freely, like the electric spark along its conductor, traversing the long catenary of the ages which hangs between us and its first effusion. If we could rise even to the level of that prayer, "I believe, help thou mine unbelief," casting ourselves unreservedly upon him as a present reality, as did they who said, "Lord, behold he whom thou lovest is sick," why should not our sickness obtain his condescending touch, and respond to his quickening power? Why should he not still save in body as well as in soul? Let us remember his words of old by his servant Isaiah, who "saw his glory and spake of him": "The Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear: but your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you" (Isa. lix. 1, 2).