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The Fundamentals of Evangelical Protestantism.¹

AN ADDRESS BY THE DEAN OF CANTERBURY

THE subject on which I am asked to address you is "The Fundamentals of Evangelical Protestantism." Well, that is a very large subject, and as I see that I must not presume to exceed half an hour, it will be scarcely possible within that time to do more than just to indicate what, as it seems to me, are the main heads of the subject.

The first fundamental which I will mention is a deep sense of sin. I think that that is the beginning of Evangelical thought and feeling, and it is a consideration which, you will agree, is not adequately appreciated as it ought to be at the present time. All the fathers of Evangelicalism commenced their career under the deepest possible conviction of sin—an apprehension of their own sin and of the consequences it must entail for them. And the better men they were, the more deeply they felt it. I recall one book which has been submerged in the course of the last century, though it was once a very favourite book among Evangelicals, and was on the shelves of the Religious Tract Society for years; it was edited by Daniel Wilson and Thomas Chalmers and Bickersteth, and other great leaders, and was entitled *The Private Thoughts of Thomas Adams*, a Vicar in the eastern counties of England at the beginning of the eighteenth century. These "Thoughts" were published from his diary after his death, and what they revealed on every page was a profound sense of his evil nature, which weighed upon him night and day, good man though he was, as we should deem him. I noticed it spoken on high authority the other day that what we need at the present time is a greater apprehension of Christ the King. Certainly we can never apprehend our Saviour too clearly and strongly in any one capacity, but I should be inclined to say that we need as much, and perhaps more, a greater apprehension of Christ the Judge.

I see people applying, as they believe, the truths of Christianity to the social and even to the political affairs of the present world, and speaking of the Kingdom of Christ as though it was to be established by the ordinary efforts of human beings in their social

¹ Reprinted from the *Record* of Nov. 29, 1917.

life and political concerns. But nobody seems to realize that when you are dealing with the affairs of society you are dealing with the affairs of a number of people who are, all of them, more or less sinful, more or less corrupt, more or less weak ; and that the first thing that has to be done, if you are to bring peace and love and the blessings of the Gospel into the ordinary life of men, is to make them sensible of the evil and corruption that is within them, and to lead them to the only source where it can be remedied. There is only one thing I know for certain about any body of men I meet, and I often think of it when I preach in church to a congregation with whom I am not familiar, that while I know nothing else of them, I do know that they are all sinners—that is quite certain—and I may also add—and here there is the saving hope—they are all sorry for it, and would be glad to do better and to be helped towards that better life ; so that if you are bringing the Gospel to them you may be sure of speaking straight to their hearts. All the teaching of the New Testament, the addresses of the Apostles and their Epistles, invariably begin with the assumption that men need salvation. Salvation may be said to be the cardinal word of the New Testament, and until we have grasped that fact, we have not begun to touch the fundamentals of Evangelical Christianity. But the essence of the Gospel is that it does bring that salvation—salvation in this world, and salvation from the natural consequences and doom of sin in the next. The very fact that the word which is first on the lips of every preacher of the Gospel, in the New Testament, is the word “salvation” brings home to us the need of every human being to be saved.

What is the nature of the salvation which is offered to him ? Its principles are all summed up in that one flash of Evangelical truth which occurs in the Acts of the Apostles, when the gaoler of Philippi, amidst the earthquake and the apparent ruin of everything about him, exclaims to St. Paul, “What shall I do to be saved ?” and St. Paul answers instantly, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved and thy house.” St. Paul pointed him at once to our Lord Jesus Christ as the one Saviour, and said, “Believe on Him, and thou shalt be saved.” I might almost say that the fundamentals of Evangelical Protestantism are summed up in that one incident. St. Paul did not tell the gaoler to go to a minister or to a church. He told him to go straight to the

Lord Jesus Christ and put his trust in Him, and he should be saved. That is the message which the Gospel brings here and now to every soul among us—that he should believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and he shall be saved.

The next question that arises as we consider this matter is : How do we know ? What is your authority for saying that if we believe on the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved ? The answer to that is very simple : the authority is the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. He told His apostles to go into all the world and to preach the Gospel to every creature, and He told them to proclaim the forgiveness of sins. After His resurrection He said again and again to them that their message was to proclaim to all people the forgiveness of sins ; and it is on His authority, and His alone, that the Apostle declared that message to the gaoler, and that we, the ministers of Christ, are privileged to go to all people and tell them that they can be saved, and how that salvation can be brought about. The authority of Christ is the one essential authority for the Evangelical message. And where do you get that authority ? Well, of course, St. Paul, as an apostle who was expressly sent by the personal authority of our Lord, was at that time authority enough to that gaoler ; but to us the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ is witnessed and afforded by the New Testament—the writings of the Apostles, and the account of our Lord's life and death, His words and teaching, in the Gospels. That is the one authority for His blessed message of salvation. In other words, the New Testament, including as it does within it the essential messages of the Old Testament—the Bible—is the one fundamental authority for the message of the Gospel, and for Evangelical Protestantism.

And the New Testament and the Bible are much more than a mere abstract authority. The New Testament and the Bible are the actual voice of God speaking to men. In the Gospels, of course, you have the very words and acts of our Lord ; in the Epistles you have the authoritative explanation and applications of those words ; in the Old Testament you have the records of the revelations which God gave to the fathers before Christ came, summed up, I might say, and embodied in one book, which is the essence of the whole of the Old Testament—I mean the Psalms. The cardinal fact for Evangelical Protestantism is that in the Bible, from the beginning to the end, but particularly in the Gospels and in the New Testament,

you have the voice of God speaking to men. That is the very greatest fact in the whole world. There is nothing whatever so momentous and supreme for human beings as the fact that you have words from God in the Bible, from beginning to end, but particularly in the New Testament, in the voice of Christ and in that of His Apostles. Our Reformers realized this aspect of the Bible with peculiar vividness. They did not regard the Bible as a collection of dogmatic statements. They saw in it Christ standing before men, speaking directly to them, and sending His messages to them also through His Apostles, and in the Old Testament—in the Psalms particularly as a type of all the rest—they heard the voice of God thundering over human hearts and revealing His nature to them. You cannot get the will and character of God made known to you in any other way or through any other sources. As St. Paul tells us, nature itself reveals His eternal power and godhead ; but the heart of God and of Christ, the will of God and of Christ, you have in the Bible alone. That is the second cardinal point of Fundamental Evangelicalism, and we should keep it continually before our minds, and ever live upon the Bible as the voice of God.

There is an extraordinary expression of Luther, whom we have lately been commemorating and who can never be honoured enough by those who believe in Evangelical truth. He refers to the woman who was healed by the touch of our Lord's garments, and he says, "If the very touch of Christ's garment was health, what must be that intimate touch of the very mind and heart of Christ which is open to us in the Gospels!" I cannot but refer in passing to an error on that subject—or at least a want of proportion in the views on that subject—which is to be found in other Churches and in some parts of our own Church. The idea which is predominant is that that intimate contact with Christ is only to be obtained through the channel of the Sacraments. I venture to say that that is the source of all superstition. The Sacraments are means whereby we receive the grace of Christ, but they are those means because they are the visible expression of the word and the will of Christ. The supreme value of the Holy Communion is that it is the actual message of the Saviour Himself to every soul that receives it, offering him forgiveness and union with His body and blood, and he who believes that promise receives that blessing. But it

is not the material element through which it is conveyed. That is not the "channel," as it has been unfortunately called in a recent book ; the channel is the word of Christ which is with that Sacrament, and upon which we lay hold by faith. Through that word we are—to use an expression I ventured on just now—in touch with Christ, His will, His promise.

Reference has been made to some weakening of that faith in the Bible as the Word of God which has arisen in our day, to some extent in consequence of what is known as the Higher Criticism. In dealing with the Bible I should hardly do justice in an assembly of this kind if I did not at the present day make some reference to that subject. Well, I will venture to sum up what I have to say in this : that no criticism, so far as I am aware, has established any thing inconsistent with the substantial truth of the Bible from beginning to end. I should always be very sorry to seem to say a single word, or entertain a single thought, in disparagement of criticism. Criticism simply means judgment ; it means the exercise of the human intellect and judgment upon the matters which are laid before us, and as reasonable men we are bound to exercise our judgment upon such matters. In proportion to the greatness of the subject is the earnestness and care and attention with which criticism should be applied to it. Therefore I say that the Bible cannot have too much criticism. Let it be criticized and examined in every way possible in order that we may understand it the better. But there is one thing to be remembered. As an admirable scholar said the other day, "Higher criticism by all means, but don't forget the deeper criticism also." The criticism we have felt it incumbent upon us to resist has been a criticism which has dealt simply with the shell and externals of the Bible, and has not gone to its inner meaning.

Questions have been most fairly raised with respect to the authorship of various books of the Bible. For a reason which, I think, may be readily understood, the authors of the Bible did not put themselves forward. They appeared to be sensible that they were not writing their own thoughts, but were the mouthpiece of a higher authority, and therefore they were glad to stand aside. But the point which we as Evangelical believers stand firm upon, and are justified in standing firm, is that the result of every discovery which has been made is that the Bible from beginning to end is true.

Whether there are some inaccuracies, if you please to call them so, in some of the narratives of the Gospels or of the Old Testament is really to any man of sense a trivial matter. God has not thought it necessary to preserve the text of the words either of the New Testament or of the Old exactly as they were written, almost as if He would teach us not to allow ourselves to be distracted by such little textual differences as there may be. But that the history of the Jews as we have it in the Old Testament, and the life of our Lord and the teaching of the Apostles as recorded in the New Testament, are true is the thing which we maintain, and which we are justified in maintaining, in the light of all modern criticism.

One other question also which I might with advantage notice, as I am passing on, is the way in which we are to know that the Bible tells us the word of God and of Christ. The answer is, on the authority of the Bible itself. The Bible itself comes before us as God speaking to men. In the Gospels He stands before the world, Himself speaking to mankind, and we accept the testimony of those Gospels because they go to our hearts and we feel them to be true. "The lion hath roared, who will not fear? The Lord God hath spoken, who can but prophesy?" In proportion as the Bible is simply and honestly read, it compels the conviction that the words in it do come from God. And as Christ is heard speaking in the New Testament, He, too, compels a like conviction. In His own words, "If I say the truth, why do ye not believe me?" In the Bible we hear God speaking, alike in the Old Testament and through the voice of our Lord.

These, then, are the cardinal stones of Evangelical Protestantism, and on them everything whatever must be built. And that being so, our salvation depends on the promise of God brought to us by His Apostles and by His ministers, on the authority of the Holy Scriptures, and our privilege is to accept that promise in full faith, without doubting, and for the purpose of personal salvation. That is the sum and substance of the whole.

It will be observed that if these truths are grasped, one negative result follows. It is not necessary, for the purpose of salvation, to have the authority of any ministerial office or of any priesthood or of any Church. The soul can stand face to face with God, trusting Him to fulfil what He has promised to it. A great part of the trouble of Christianity has been that people have asked themselves

anxiously, "Can I be saved in this church or in that church?" The answer is, "You can be saved in any church, provided you will believe the Lord Jesus Christ. And above all—above all—you do not need any priest to intervene between you and Him, or to give you any other authority than He gives you Himself." Of all the evils to which the Church of England is now being exposed by the Romish tendency within it, I am disposed to think that the greatest and most deadly is the introduction of the practice of confession and priestly absolution.

I believe for one thing, that that practice is absolutely inconsistent with a full apprehension of sin and of its nature. I venture very much to doubt whether a true confession was ever made to a human being, and this for two reasons: partly because no man fully knows himself and can tell the secrets of his own heart, and partly also because, in speaking to a human being, he is under an inevitable temptation to soften down and to explain away and not fully realize the depth of his sin. But if a man kneels before his God and confesses to God what his sins are, he knows that no excuses, no explanations, no palliations are of any use whatever. In proportion as a man is brought face to face with God in his own closet and in his own heart, he learns the depth of his sin, and he begins to understand that the only person who can possibly forgive him is not any human instrument, but God Himself. If you are to keep alive in the English people, or in any people, real truthfulness of self-examination and submission of the heart to God, you must have that self-examination made to God Himself and not to a fellow-being. I pass over all the incidental evils of confession and absolution because, bad as they are, I believe them to be quite trivial compared with the fact that these practices obscure the real nature of sin and of salvation.

I must next speak about the Sacraments. The essential thing is to keep alive the fact that they are, both of them, promises of Christ, and their blessing is dependent on the degree in which those promises are believed in by us. One danger of the present day is the effort which is being made, and made systematically, to supersede the ordinary Morning Service of the Church of England by what is called the "principal service"—that is to say, the celebration of the Holy Communion before all the congregation. I venture to say that while this has many disadvantages in other

ways, its great misfortune is that it obscures—I had almost said profanes—the promise of Christ in the Holy Communion. Just consider that in the Holy Communion Christ is as it were standing before you, recalling His own sacrifice, and offering to you the symbols of His body and blood that you may receive forgiveness of sins and be partakers of His spiritual life ; and then consider what it means to offer that to a congregation of whom you know perfectly well that a considerable number will not at that moment accept the offer. Our Reformers, in their second Prayer Book, denounced this gazing at the Holy Communion as a high offence to Christ. The old order of the Church of England first of all prepared the soul, by the Scriptures and by prayers, for communion with God, and then desired and urged a careful preparation before men came to the still more sacred service of the Holy Communion. That is the proper way in which the Sacrament ought to be approached. It is true that in the early Church the Holy Communion was the principal service of the day, but in those times, in that first fervour of Christian enthusiasm, every Christian who was present came forward to receive the sacrament which was offered to him. As the Church went on it became necessary—using a phrase familiar at the time of the Reformers—to “fence” the Holy Communion, so that, while still keeping it open to everybody who would come, it should be administered in such a way that men would come to it after due preparation and with fitting solemnity. If that “principal service” became the rule in the Church of England, first of all the influence of God’s Word in the Scriptures and the prayers would be very much diminished, and, in the second place, the effect would be, not to exact the Holy Communion, but to diminish the sanctity with which it is regarded.

I must permit myself to pass only to one more subject, and that is the Church. The Church, as our Article XIX. says, “is a congregation of faithful men, in the which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly ministered according to Christ’s ordinance in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same.” It is the body of faithful people. Unhappily, in every place there are a number of people who, while belonging to the visible Church, are not really faithful people. No Church on earth is perfect, but it fulfils Christ’s purpose in proportion as it lives according to His Word in the reading of the Scriptures and the due use of the Sacra-

ments. And one use of the Church is that every member may help every other member. We are so constituted that we are none of us sufficient in ourselves, and it is the greatest privilege in belonging to a communion that the love and faith of all the members is united to influence others.

On that subject I regret to say that there is a tendency which is to be most deeply regretted—namely, the tendency towards separation of portions of a Church from the whole Church in order to guard, as the separatists think, some particular truth. It is the evil, in plain words, of schism, and we are beginning to be sensible of the great evil which schism produces. Schism has brought us very near to turning the teaching of Christ out of our elementary schools. I am quite sure, to mention another instance of it, that our own Church has suffered very deeply by the separation from it of bodies of earnest Nonconformists who were jealous for the particular truth they were guarding. If they had stayed with us we should not have been in our present danger of being Romanized because their influence would have steadied us. I sometimes think also—you may regard it as a curious observation—that we have suffered very much by the separation of the Church of Ireland from the Church of England, because as long as you had the united Church of England and Ireland, you had the Irish Bishops sitting side by side with the English Bishops, and the Irish Bishops at all events knew what Roman Catholicism was. That is only one illustration. Let us use every means that we can—this is a point of Fundamental Evangelicalism—and be ever on the watch for further means that may be open to us, for reunion with our fellow Evangelical Christians in this country.

And when I say this country I do not mean England only; I mean Scotland also. It is lamentable and scandalous that there should be any lack of intercommunion between the Protestant Church of England and the Presbyterian Church of Scotland. If the day could ever come when the Evangelical Church of England and the Evangelical Church of Scotland could form one body, the influence of such a union in elevating the religious life of the British Empire would be incalculable. Then we have that body among ourselves here in England whose loss is the most grievous we ever sustained—I mean the Wesleyans.

It is quite true that for the ultimate salvation of our soul each

individual can trust himself entirely into Christ's hands, but, for the welfare of Christian society, unity is absolutely essential if we are to be all that we ought to be. The only things we must guard against, and from which we must keep ourselves entirely aloof, are those churches which set up between Christ and the soul a human organization. To speak of reunion with Rome while Rome remains what it is—and it always must remain what it is—appears to me the highest form of perversity. But in this one faith of Christ our Saviour, resting absolutely on the Bible, living in the light of the Word of God as the very sun of human nature, proclaiming Him and His authority wherever we go, if we thus live together and work together in that sense, we may hope to make our country all that she ought to be, and all that we long to see her.

