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## OXFORD CONFERENCE OF EVANGELICAL CHURCHMEN.

GENERAL SUBJECT : "THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE CHURCH."

Opening Address by the Rev. C. M. CHAVASSE, M.C., M.A.,

*Master of St. Peter's Hall, Oxford.*

A YEAR ago I ventured to acquaint this Conference with the alarming financial position which then menaced St. Peter's Hall. Owing to the collapse, two years previously, of the Educational Trust which had backed the founding of the Hall, we were burdened with a liability of nearly £50,000; even though we had already reduced by £45,000 the original debt that had been hung round our neck. This meant that nearly £5 a day had to be raised to meet interest charges and keep the Hall open, before any money could be found for the reduction of the capital sum which threatened us with extinction. I am bound thus to refer to the daunting report to which the Conference then listened so sympathetically, if for no other reason than to acknowledge, as publicly, our gratitude to Almighty God for the crowning mercy we have received at His hand. Hardly had two months passed away, when Lord Nuffield—whose name has become proverbial for amazing benefactions—undertook to pay off our crushing liability, on condition that we continued our endeavour to raise £50,000—not now for debt-extinction, but for that endowment and development which is necessary if St. Peter's is to acquire the full status of a Public Hall in the University. Quite literally, therefore, by the stroke of a pen, the situation has been completely transformed. Every penny now subscribed to our Appeal Fund is no longer swept away to stave off disaster, but, instead, brings St. Peter's Hall nearer to complete establishment. During the past nine months the response to Lord Nuffield's great challenge has been satisfactory if not equally sensational. Nearly £4,000 has already been received by our honorary treasurer, who also reports that (apart from any windfalls) he can now count on annual subscriptions (great and small) amounting to £1,600 for each of the next six years. Furthermore, there will be launched next year a great thank-offering appeal in connection with the celebration of the fourth centenary of the Reformation. Undoubtedly there will be many who will desire to mark in some tangible form the nation's gratitude to God for the English Bible and the English Reformation. Could such a thank-offering assume a more suitable shape than the full establishment of St. Peter's (with its principles and traditions) as a

Public Hall in the University city which possesses the Martyrs' Memorial, and immediately opposite the old gateway of what was once St. Mary's College, where Erasmus learnt Greek and met Colet ?

There is the added reason that, as this Conference knows, the first meetings which originated the idea of such a quarto-centenary celebration, and made it possible, were convened at St. Peter's Hall in the early months of 1932. Humanly speaking, had there been no St. Peter's Hall there would probably have been no quarto-centenary celebration.

#### THE REFORMATION.

Recalling those meetings five years ago which fixed upon 1538, the date of the "setting up" of the English Bible in parish churches, as the focus-point in time of the Reformation movement, I am sorry that the plans for the forthcoming celebration next year seem to be concentrating attention exclusively on the English Bible, and side-tracking the Reformation itself, though the two happenings are inseparably associated one with the other.

It will not, therefore, be out of place if I remind you of the four great results of the Reformation movement in England which Oxford and Cambridge scholars of all denominations, after conference together in this very Hall, emphasized as calling for special thanksgiving.

- (1) The Reformation has given to every English man, woman, and child free access to the Bible in their own tongue as the supreme rule and standard for faith, life, and devotion.
- (2) The Reformation reasserted the Gospel of salvation by the free grace of God through faith in Christ, and of the direct personal access of the believer to God through Christ.
- (3) The Reformation, by its appeal to the Scriptures, led to the recognition of more spiritual conceptions of the Church and Sacraments, to the purification of worship, and to renewed emphasis on the ministry of the Word.
- (4) The Reformation, by its emphasis on the spiritual liberty of the children of God, proclaimed in Holy Scripture, has been the fruitful seed of true liberty in all departments of thought and life.

I hope, therefore, that the findings of this Conference may include a recommendation that a fresh study next year of Reformation principles and history would effectively educate the Church as to its Responsibility to God, to its own members, and to the nation. I suggest, also, that next April we take the Reformation as the subject of this Conference.

Meanwhile, I would urge that in our preparations for the forthcoming quarto-centenary celebration we shall not be ashamed of the Reformation. During the past century there has been a conspiracy in the Church (which the laity have abhorred) to deprecate and even to defame the Reformation. It is time that sort of slander was stopped ; and the opportunity of so doing now lies to the hand of loyal Church people. Let us roundly declare with Bishop Lightfoot

that "If the foundation of the Church is the first cause of thankfulness, the Reformation of the Church must be the second." And I am disposed to think that, when on Sunday, June 19th, 1938, we all praise God for the English Bible and the English Reformation, if only the proposed Thank-offering Fund for St. Peter's Hall has been made widely known by its friends, the response will show how the people of this land regard the travailing and re-birth of the Church of England four centuries ago.

#### THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE CHURCH.

This brings me to the general subject of our present Conference—"The Responsibility of the Church"; for it has a close connection with the Reformation.

The responsibility of the Church may be summed up in two words—"Faithful Witness." As regards the *witness*, it is that which the Reformation won for us out of the reopened pages of Holy Scripture. Is it not as "a witness and a keeper of Holy Writ" that the 20th Article of Religion describes the responsibility of the Church? As regards *faithful* witness, we need to recapture the unshakable steadfastness of Reformation leaders, who bought our English heritage with their blood.

It was to bear witness to the reality and love of God that His Son became Incarnate.

Seeing, then, that the Church is the extension of the Incarnation, and the Body of Christ on earth, it was ordained to carry on the witness of its Divine Head. Moreover, the Holy Spirit, which indwells the Body of the Church, requires such "faithful witness" in order to convict the world in respect of sin and righteousness and judgment. Indeed, the responsibility of the Church for faithful witness is stressed throughout the New Testament; and is summed up in the Two Witnesses of the eleventh chapter of Revelation. In Jewish symbolism a two-fold witness is true witness. And the effective testimony of the two Old Testament figures, Moses and Elijah, represent, first, the faithful witness of the Church of Israel; then its fulfilment in the person of the victorious Lamb that was slain; and, finally, the redemptive ministry of the Christian Church which thenceforth expresses Him. That is to say, it is no part of the Church's responsibility to attempt to do God's work for Him. It is not the task of the Church to build the kingdom of God on earth; nor need the Church be concerned whether or no its witness is accepted by the world. Our little faith is so pitifully prone to forget the fact of God's overruling providence, and His manifest interventions on the plane of history which it is the prime object of Apocalyptic literature to disclose. God will work out His own purposes, in His own way, and at His own good time and pleasure: if only the faithful witness of the Church affords Him a fulcrum whereby He may bring His Omnipotence to bear upon the world. The Eternal Gospel, which is our witness, possesses its own living power apart from ourselves. And even though that witness be silenced in blood, it yet exerts the resurrection might of the Risen

Saviour Himself to Whom it testifies, and is therefore powerful to make the kingdoms of this world the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ. It is difficult to say whether, in the *Pilgrim's Progress*, Christian looked upon a representation of Christ Himself, or of His Church, or of the ideal minister of the Gospel, when he saw at the Interpreter's house the picture of "a very grave person hung up against the wall." "It had its eyes lifted up to heaven, the best of books was in its hand, the law of truth was written upon its lips, the world was behind its back. It stood as if it pleaded with men, and a crown of gold did hang over its head." But certainly a master hand has depicted that "faithful witness" which is the Church's fundamental responsibility to God.

Let us pass on, then, to learn how that witness operates, first, as regards the English nation; then, as regards other Protestant Churches; and, finally, as regards the Church of England itself.

### THE CHURCH AND THE NATION.

#### I. *As regards the responsibility of the Church of England to the Nation,*

We cannot be too thankful that the Reformation rediscovered for the Church her true spiritual mission of faithful witness, and replaced her in her true sphere of influence—namely, the hearts and consciences of men. The Church came to these shores, fourteen centuries ago, equipped with the political organization she had inherited from the dying hands of the Roman Empire. Thus it was that all our national institutions were formed under the fostering care of the Church, which, indeed, first gave meaning to the State. But, gradually, as the lesson was learned, the organism of the State grew up to become the expression of the national life; and the inevitable transfer to the State of work once done by the Church caused, increasingly, the most serious collisions. The Reformation saved the situation. And though, thereafter, the Church seemed to decline in power, in reality her importance increased in proportion as the State took her place in the realm of political administration. The State is now the executor of national policy; but the Church still possesses the power to direct that policy. The State is avowedly the exponent of the national will; but the Church still remains as the educator of the will of the people. The State is mainly concerned with the mechanism of government; but it is the Church which inculcates the principles of righteous government. This ministry of faithful witness is the noblest and highest which any organized body can assume; and, as long as the Establishment continues, the Church will be recognized as the soul of the nation. Thus did the Church recover at the Reformation her true commission from Christ of Faithful Witness, and so of influencing national life and character. How richly England has benefited thereby, Bishop Mandell Creighton, that great historian, has strikingly exemplified. "I cannot say" he wrote in 1884, "that before the Reformation England's policy showed a greater care for righteousness than did that of its neighbours; but since the Reforma-

tion, there have been many conspicuous instances in which England has shown a more exalted standard of national morality than can as yet be said to prevail universally. England has gained by the Reformation in the more sterling qualities of national life." The truth of his words is even more evident to-day, as this country strives to bring Christian principles to bear upon international politics, in conjunction with nations whose opinion is moulded by a Church which is still unreformed.

#### FAITHFUL WITNESS AND REUNION.

#### II. *In the second place there is the responsibility of our Church towards the other sister Churches of the Reformation.*

Canon F. R. Barry, in his *Relevance of the Church*, has pointed out how the Oxford Movement made the Church self-conscious. Tractarians were for ever asking the question, "What is the Church?"; and so fixing the attention of all Churches inwardly upon themselves, instead of directing it outwards to their world-wide mission of faithful witness. Such an unhealthy egotism could only result in each Church regarding itself as a mutual self-improvement society. It also meant that each particular branch of the Church Universal defined its own Communion in terms which un-churched all the rest; so that, in order to whitewash the schisms of Christendom, an increasing number of the faithful came to favour the idea of the Invisible Church, which (as Dr. Rashdall rightly declared) is "a contradiction of terms." But if the Visible Church is the Body of Christ on earth, then a living and growing organism cannot be defined apart from, what Aristotle called, its "end" and "meaning." The enquiry "What is the Church?" can only be answered by asking first "What is the Church for?" And, once we agree that the responsibility of the Church is "faithful witness," we beckon quickly enough to our partners in the other boat, to come and aid us in the tremendous mission of world redemption.

In the book to which I have already referred, Canon Barry first quotes the saying of the Dean of Exeter that "It was the Evangelicals who taught the Church to be missionary," and then adds as follows: "In devoting itself to its proper task of evangelization and redemption, the English Church has found its own life. It has learnt the meaning of *fellowship in service*, both as between its own various schools of thought and with other Churches." That is to say, it is only as the separate Churches fulfil their responsibility of Faithful Witness, that a divided Christendom will come to find its unity.

It was remarkable how the whole National Assembly, last June, rose and cheered the declaration of Canon Anthony Deane that a Round Table Conference would never bring real unity to the Church of England, but only co-operation in evangelistic effort. It is also significant that all practical efforts for reunion between Protestant Churches arise in the mission field. If, therefore, in response to the Archbishop's recall to religion, the various denominations would concentrate on their primary responsibility of "faithful witness," and

thereby, of building up of the body of Christ ; then at length they would all attain unto the unity of the faith. Reunion cannot be manufactured as if it were an end in itself. It must be born from above, for it is God's reward to those who seek with singleness of heart to do His will.

#### THE FAITHFUL MINORITY.

### III. *In the last place, there is the responsibility of the Church to itself.*

The Prayer Book speaks of "the Church Militant here in earth" ; and thereby pictures an army going forth, conquering and to conquer, wielding the sword of the Spirit beneath the banner of Him whose Name is "Faithful and True." But do you recognize the original, as you know it, from such a picture? The Church in one of its aspects may be regarded as an asylum or hospital—a home for the hungry, the heavy-laden, and the sinful ; and its qualification for admission simply that of consciousness of need. It may also be viewed as the ordained channel through which Divine gifts of healing and strength come down to the life of man. As such—as a hospital and a vehicle of grace—it is pictured in the parable of the grain of mustard seed, which "became a tree, and the birds of the air lodged in the branches thereof." But there is, also, the companion parable of leaven, "which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal, till it was all leavened." To fasten on one interpretation only, which (think you) symbolizes the Church in the hand of the Holy Spirit, the leaven or the three measures of meal? I think the significance both of the quantity and of the quality of the meal is generally unrecognized. It was *meal* ; a manufactured article, which had already undergone treatment in the process of transformation from grain to become the staff of life. And it was only *three measures* of meal ; for a lump of leaven cannot effect a change upon more than a limited mass of dough, still less upon a barn-full of unground corn. We have, then, in this parable, first, the world to be transformed—namely, the grain in the storehouse ; secondly, the Church—the three measures of meal—which needs to be leavened so that (in Chrysostom's words) it itself "becomes leaven to the rest" ; and, thirdly, an active ministry hid in the Church—the leaven—upon which everything depends. What, then, is this active ministry which by its influence animates the whole Church to become the agent of redemption in society? It is the ministry of the tiny body of those who are whole-heartedly the slaves of Christ. These are the "faithful remnant" of Israel. These are the Blessed of the Sermon on the Mount—the salt of the earth, and the light of the world. And their leavening ministry is that of "faithful witness" by lip and life. Then, let me repeat it, the whole destiny of the world depends upon them and their number ; for each crumb of leaven cannot affect more than a limited measure of what is still unleavened. Look then at the leaven, which might be called the true Church, or the Church within the Church. In the Book of Revelation it is symbolized by the 144,000. In the Apocalypse,

twelve and its multiples is the number of the Church, since there were twelve tribes of Israel. Twelve thousand from each of the twelve tribes is a relatively small minority of the full total of the Chosen People. But yet, to change the metaphor, this minority is the rock on which Christ builds His Church. The little army appears in chapter seven, as the believing remnant of the old Jewish Church. It reappears in chapter fourteen as the bodyguard of the Lamb as He stands on Mount Zion ; and as such represents the active and suffering ministry of the new Christian Church. It is hard to know whether this little host is spoken of as alive or dead ; and it does not matter for it is about to perish for its virgin-like fidelity to the heavenly Bridegroom. For one moment the 144,000 march across the stage with their salute, "Morituri te salutamus," and then they disappear from sight to sing the new song of that victory which comes five chapters later. As our eyes gaze wistfully after them, and our ears catch faint strains of the triumph song we fain would learn ; do we understand why all this talk of revival and recall to religion seems to achieve so little ? There are not a sufficient number of truly consecrated personalities in the Church of our generation. In this matter of surrender of self, and of other worldliness, we are not a patch upon our fathers. And an unleavened three measures of meal will never transform the world. It is "faithful witness" that is so sorely needed to-day in the Church itself : a witness bound to involve suffering and sacrifice, but accepted joyously as the glory of the followers of the Crucified. As far back as Easter, 1924, a Conference of Missionaries in Jerusalem concluded their report with these words—"The whole world is awaiting the release of the vital force of the living Spirit of the Risen Christ Himself, through human personalities. Such spiritual power is in the good purpose of God always available. But there is nothing in the Bible or in the experience of the Church to suggest that it is available cheaply. Each marked release of the Holy Spirit of God in human lives must be at cost." The world is still waiting till a sufficient number realize and assume the responsibility of the Church for "faithful witness" ; and so, turning their back on the world, and taking up their cross, learn what triumphs Christ can win through them.