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Low Churchmanship

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THERE is in logic a fallacy known as "ambiguity of terms" when the same word is used in an argument in two different senses. Such ambiguity is frequent in arguments about "High" and "Low" churchman, and it is not surprising in view of the changes of meaning undergone by these words in the course of 250 years.

At the end of the seventeenth century a "High" churchman believed in the Apostolic succession of bishops, disliked dissent on principle, and was a Tory in politics; those churchmen who did not make such claims for the bishops and were Whig in politics seem to have been termed "Low." Akin to the "Low" churchmen, but distinguished from them were the "Latitudinarians" who disliked party strife and wanted a comprehensive reformed national church with a simple Christian creed. The three parties may perhaps be illustrated by Archbishop Sancroft, ejected as a non-juror; his successor in the primacy, Archbishop Tillotson; and Gilbert Burnet, bishop of Salisbury.

In the eighteenth century Low churchmen and Latitudinarians tended to merge, and were often bitterly opposed to a new party that developed during that period, the Evangelicals. Hence at the end of the eighteenth century the parties within the Church of England were "High" "Low" and "Evangelical." During the nineteenth century "High" churchmanship acquired a new meaning through the Oxford movement; Evangelicals came to be identified (perhaps wrongly) with "Low" churchmen; and a new Latitudinarian or "Broad-church" school developed under such leaders as Dr. Arnold and Dean Stanley. At the end of the nineteenth century the parties were classified as "High, Low and Broad." To-day these terms are out of fashion and are sometimes replaced by "Anglo-Catholic, Evangelical, Modernist." The new terms are misleading, for

there are High churchmen who are not Anglo-Catholic, and Broad-churchmen who resent the label "Modernist" (which should be restricted to those who combine scientific criticism of creeds with the sacramentalism of Catholicism); there are also Low churchmen who are not Evangelicals, and the purpose of this article is to explain that position.

"Low churchmanship" only implies a low or modest view of ecclesiastical institutions as contrasted with those who place a higher value on church, ministry and sacraments; it has no necessary connection with laziness, intolerance, or dislike of ritual.

A low churchman regards churches as Christian friendly societies; he may value his own membership in a particular church but he will not worry over Christians who belong to other churches or to no church; he cannot think that a church possessing Apostolic succession is a truer church than those which have no such bishops; and while he is a happy and loyal member of the Established Episcopalian Church in England he may, when in Scotland, be equally happy in the Established Church of that country which is Presbyterian. He therefore differs from the "High" churchmen who regards episcopally governed churches with Apostolic succession as parts of the "Catholic Church" from which the non-episcopal churches are excluded.

Again, a low churchman agrees that a church needs a commissioned ministry, but does not think that the minister possesses spiritual powers denied to the laity; he respects a minister (of whatever denomination) who is competent as a teacher, a leader in worship, and (if a parish minister) as pastor, but he does not like the word "priest" and can only use it of the clergy of the Church of England on the understanding that it is an abbreviation of "presbyter" which has no sacerdotal significance. He does not wish the clergy to have too much power, and he is glad that in the Church of England the supreme tribunal for deciding what is or is not according to its standards is the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council. If he is a clergyman he will take care not to intrude where he is not wanted or to interfere unbidden in the souls of those who do not desire his guidance.

Further, he takes a lower view of the sacraments than the High churchman. He values the two sacraments as the rites respectively of initiation and fellowship in a Christian

friendly society, but he does not see in either of them anything of a "miraculous" nature. While he himself observes the Lord's Supper with care and reverence (whether he communicates frequently or occasionally) he cannot place upon that rite of remembrance and fellowship the value assigned to it by some communicants; while he would like his fellow-churchmen to meet him at the Lord's table, he cannot press the sacrament on those who do not desire it; he probably does not think of "making the Lord's service" the chief act of worship every Lord's Day." As to the details of its administration he may not have any definite views; he may prefer the traditional practice of communion after morning service, or he may have found a blessing in evening communion, or he may prefer an early celebration. Questions as to the position and dress of the celebrant possibly do not interest him; he may prefer to take the north end position at an unadorned table, but he knows that a "low" view of the sacrament may be held by a minister wearing a chasuble such as is common in the Lutheran church of Norway, just as a rigidly "high" view may be taught by a minister standing at the north end of the table.

But though a low churchman takes a low view of church ministry and sacraments he takes a high view of the Gospel which every Christian church is commissioned to teach, the Christian view of God, Duty and Destiny; he realizes that the present misery of the world is due to the rejection of that Gospel, and he would like to do all in his power to further that Gospel as our only hope of sanity, safety and peace; he would therefore like to work with, and not against, those churchmen who repudiate the title of "low."

He turns first to the Evangelicals, whether conservative or liberal. He has much in common with them, insistence on the right of private judgment, rejection of sacerdotalism, and a similar view of the sacraments; but he may be unable to utter some of the phrases associated with Evangelicalism or to share the view of Biblical inspiration held by the more conservative Evangelicals. Yet the association of Low churchmen and Evangelicals might be good for both; the low churchmen might act as a check on extravagance and intolerance; the Evangelicals might save the low churchmen from coldness or want of vision.

With the Broad-church group he also has much in common in regard to Private Judgment, the ministry and the sacraments. Probably he also accepts a measure of Biblical criticism which 50 years ago would have marked him as a Broad churchman ; but he does not wish to go as far as some members of that group have gone and he is nervous about what is vaguely termed " Modernism."

If, however, Low churchmen; Broad-churchmen, and Evangelicals could work in harmony they would constitute a strong " Protestant front " in the Church of England and would remove the fears now felt in some quarters that an Anglo-Catholic revolution may eject from an unprotestantized Church those who insist on the Protestant right of Private Judgment.

When a low churchman approaches a high churchman he must feel that a great gulf is fixed between them by such doctrines as that of Apostolic Succession. Yet there are High churchmen and High churchmen ; sometimes, when the position has been frankly stated on both sides, it is possible for a low churchman to work and worship to a considerable extent with those whose estimate of church ministry and sacraments is so different from his own. If so, a low churchman may perhaps be a " liaison officer " between two groups which, though often opposed, yet belong to the same communion.

It may be said that the Low church group ought not to exist and that its members could be absorbed by either the liberal Evangelical group or the more moderate of the Broad-church school ; and as a matter of fact some who ought to be called " Low churchmen " are to be found in the Modern Churchmen's Union and probably also in the A.E.G.M. The term, however, does apply to some who cannot call themselves either Evangelicals or Broad-churchmen, and their existence should be recognized even though the term " Low churchman " is now seldom heard.

Possibly in reading this description some may have recognized their own position and are therefore shown up as low churchmen in spite of themselves. They need not be ashamed of the title ; though in the eighteenth century low churchmanship was often associated with sluggishness and worldliness, those sinister associations have long since passed away ; and to-day, among those who are trying to proclaim

the Gospel of Christ within the comprehensive fellowship of the Church of England, there is certainly a place for those who, while maintaining the Protestant right of Private Judgment, are unable to label themselves either Evangelicals or Broad-churchmen ; the simplest description of the position that we have reached (perhaps after making trial of other positions and parties) is that of LOW CHURCHMEN. They have no organ or organization to express their views, but in the opinion of the writer of this description there is a place and work for them, alongside the other Protestant members of the Church of England, in such a Society as the National Church League, which exists for the maintenance of the principles we value most.

THE EPISTLE TO THE GALATIANS

By Martin Luther. (Protestant Reformation Society.) 5s.

One of Martin Luther's greatest works is his commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians. The Harrison Trust has recently published an abbreviated edition of the commentary, edited by the Rev. John Prince Fellowes, from the English Translation of Erasmus Middleton, B.D. This edition contains all the doctrinal values of the complete work.

The message of the epistle is as much as ever needed to-day. "The doctrine here laid down by St. Paul is the necessary knowledge of all true Christian life." St. Paul was "a chosen vessel" to explain and interpret under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the meaning of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. His training in the Old Testament, his wonderful conversion, his salvation by grace alone, his invasion by Christ, and his time spent in Arabia under the Teaching of the Holy Ghost taught him the meaning of justification which he has given us in three short memorable sentences: "Justified by grace," "Justified by His blood," "Justified by faith." Luther learnt this from the Apostle, and in his commentary has expounded it in detail. Every verse in the epistle is commented upon, and the truth is given in distinction to error, in the fullest detail. Justification is shown to be "not of works." Law is to shut up all to Christ, to convict, condemn, restrain and compel men to seek relief from its errors in the death of Christ. The exposition of the third chapter is specially valuable when Christ is shown to have made Himself so one with sinful man that He can bear his curse as his substitute and set him free to serve God and keep His law as a son in his Father's house.

The book is well printed in good type. We commend it with John Bunyan's testimony to it, "God did cast into my hand Luther's commentary on Galatians." He came to prefer it, "excepting the Bible, before all the books that I ever have seen."

W. TALBOT RICE.