

Liberal Evangelicalism: What it is and What it stands for.¹

I.—THE ESSENCE OF EVANGELICALISM.

AN English Churchman who appreciates the genius of his Church will feel that one of its most distinctive characteristics is its broad platform. No Christian can say with such truth as the English Churchman: "Thou hast set my feet in a large room." Sometimes the layman is a little petulant with this broad toleration. He finds such diversity in outlook among our clergy—the different keynotes struck, emphasis laid on different points of Christian doctrine, such variety in conducting public worship—that he cries out for uniformity. Little does he realize that uniformity means stagnation and death.

There never was (and, we trust, never will be) a time in our Church's history when all its clergy thought alike. If that dull day should ever dawn, it will set upon a dying Church. Schools of thought there always have been and always will be.

It is exceedingly difficult to give definitions of these schools of thought, for this reason: there is an ineradicable tendency so to word the definition as quite unintentionally to disparage those from whom we differ, and to flatter those with whom we agree. No man can really define the position of another; indeed, so much do bias and predisposition and mental peculiarities contribute to the shaping of one's outlook, that it is doubtful if a man can always state the why and wherefore of his own position. Logic is only one of the factors (and seldom the greatest) which determine our religious standpoint, instinct, training, and other like forces, affect us so much more forcibly.

There are three leading schools of thought in our Church—the High, the Evangelical, and the Broad. The Evangelical

[¹ It may be convenient to state that the CHURCHMAN is not necessarily identified with all the views set forth in this series of papers. They are contributed by one of the ablest writers amongst the younger Evangelicals who is entitled to be heard.—ED.]

stands in the intermediate position, for he has much in common with both the others. He recognizes freely and heartily the right of the others to exist, but we would say at once—and only once, for we are not about to write a polemic—that he marks in both these other schools a tendency to develop beyond legitimate limits.

So far as the former is concerned, it has recently been admitted by a leading High Churchman that the limit has already been passed. The same charge can be made against the extreme representation of the Broad Church school, but over these points we shall spend no time.

The Broad Churchman has never been made to feel at home in the Church. He has been always regarded with suspicion, and generally with dislike. Very largely this is due to his most prominent characteristic—cold and impartial criticism. No doctrine is passed over by him without examination. He will take nothing on trust. Reason and conscience are his guides to truth. He will apply his measuring line to the most venerable dogmas. He will crush down sentiment and plumb the depths of the most sacred doctrines, and till he finds the bottom he will not believe. Like St. Thomas, he demands to put his finger in the very wound-prints. While others are content to kneel at the Cross in wondering and worshipping awe, he will sit and argue. Not in irreverence, let it be said. He is no more irreverent than are we who differ from him. His reason is God's gift, and to be false to it would be unfaithfulness to God.

The result is that no section of Churchmen have done so much for theology as he has. Directly his contribution has been immense, indirectly it has been even greater, for he has stimulated thought and inquiry in others; he has forced those whose ultimate conclusion is contrary to his own to think out and restate their own position. The formulation of Christian doctrine in the Creeds was due very largely to the ancient heretics, and these heretics were frequently Broad Churchmen born out of due time. He is like the salt in our meals: without

him our Church would be dull and flavourless. Unless he abides in the ship we cannot be saved.

The High and the Broad Churchmen have little in common. The former finds his ideal in the past, and all his efforts are bent upon recreating that ideal; the latter is seeking to build up a conception of truth greater, higher, and deeper, than any age has yet seen. The former conceives the Church as having once attained; the latter conceives the Church as always attaining, and with a future yet before it wherein it will attain higher still. The former looks back wistfully on the past; the latter looks hopefully to the future. The High Churchman's ideal is static, the Broad Churchman's dynamic.

These two types of mind are utterly unable to do justice to one another. The Broad Churchman is impatient and somewhat contemptuous towards the High Churchman; he in turn is shocked and alarmed at the Broad Churchman, whom he regards as a very dangerous and suspicious character, and sometimes as a clever rascal.

But between these two extremes is a third class—the Evangelicals, so called. It is a peculiarly difficult thing to describe them. No definition reasonably exact can be given of them. They have no peculiar tenets. They are not essentially the Protestants of the Church. They are Protestants, but so are the Broad Churchmen—and often far stronger Protestants, too; and so were the old High Churchmen and the old Low Churchmen, who were the bitterest opponents the Evangelicals ever had. They are Protestants, but their Protestantism is secondary, and merely the outcome of something far deeper.

The Evangelicals have always been happy in the Church. When the rupture of the Methodists from the Church took place, the Evangelicals remained in their old spiritual home. They refused to be driven out. Although they were, as Overton has said, "the salt of the earth in their day," they were cold-shouldered and ridiculed, for they were guilty of the awful crime of enthusiasm. But secede they would not, because they were essentially Churchmen—men who loved the Prayer-Book

and loved the national Church. But despite all they did for the Church they were never welcomed; despite the fact that they were the life and soul of foreign missions and evangelistic work, and the pioneers of philanthropy and social betterment, they were always regarded as "the ugly duckling." Things are better to-day; but, still, though they believe from their hearts that they express more truly than any other section of Churchmen the genius of the Catholic, Apostolic, Reformed, and Protestant Church of England, there are not absent from time to time indications that the old feeling towards them is not dead.

The distinctive thing about the Evangelical is the emphasis which he lays upon the fact of the death of Christ. His doctrine concerning that great transaction is practically identical with that of the High Churchman, but he differs from him in this: Calvary is the centre of gravity of his faith, and *everything else* is merely incidental to that. The Incarnation, upon which the High Churchman lays chief stress, is to him secondary, except in so far as it was the preliminary to the Atonement. It was not enough that God in Christ entered into human life to touch it, elevate and ennoble it. Humanity needed more than that. Humanity was lost and ruined, and the only thing which could help it was salvation, and this the Cross of Jesus achieved. Each son of man stands a lost and condemned sinner before God, and the Cross is his only hope. This is the characteristic of Evangelicalism. It makes no pretensions to discovery of this truth; it acknowledges gladly that such a faith is held far beyond the limits of its own school of thought; but it stands for the constant emphasis of this doctrine. This is the very essence, the very root, the very kernel, of Christianity.

"We preach Christ *crucified*:" not merely Christ incarnate in the past, or Christ immanent in the present. All such truths are but the setting of the jewel. The keynote of the Christian message to us is that "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners," that that salvation was achieved by the death of the Lord; for "without shedding of blood there is no remission."

We are not greatly exercised about theory. *How* the world's salvation was achieved on Calvary is one question. Reverent inquiry is not only legitimate, but desirable, and there is no occasion for agreement on this point upon the part of thinkers. Our own Church has never seen fit to attempt to formulate any theory of the Atonement. But Evangelical teaching insists that the central truth of Christianity is *the fact* that man's salvation was achieved by the sacrificial death of Jesus, and that by faith that death is efficacious for us to-day.

It is this insistence upon the propitiatory character of Christ's death which on the one hand unites us with the more moderate High Churchmen, and on the other hand divides us from the extreme Broad Churchmen. A writer of extreme liberal views has expressed himself very clearly, and we can make our point clearer by noting his words :

"In these ages the significance of one short life seems as nothing, and when it is claimed that the salvation of our race was effected on a certain Friday afternoon in the spring of a year somewhere about A.D. 30, the mind recoils from the startling incongruity." "Jesus might have died in bed, if He had been born in different circumstances, but He would still be the Saviour of men if He had lived out a life of perpetual sacrifice." "The Cross was a circumstance, a hindrance, an accident. It was the preceding life, the unswerving fidelity, the triumphant personality, of Jesus, which turned a secular accident into a sacred opportunity."

Here the wide gulf is disclosed. We do grasp the hands of the large bulk of Broad Churchmen across many of the narrow streams which divide us ; we Liberal Evangelicals are in harmony with them upon many questions, but we cannot touch finger-tips across the broad stream between us and those who think thus of the redeeming death of the Lord. We do not depreciate "the preceding life"—far from it. We regard this as a part of the Atonement, inasmuch as it was the prelude to the great and final act. But apart from the consummatory death, the life is for us robbed of its supreme value. The ethics of

Jesus remain, His example is ours, but we are like men in a museum forbidden to touch the exhibits. We gaze with reverent awe at the beauty displayed in that life, and the high standard set forth, but we cannot make it ours. Apart from Calvary, there remains a wondrous spectacle, but it is a dead thing for us ; it is only the death and faith in that death which can make it alive for us.

Full well we know that philosophy sometimes deals unsympathetically with this great truth ; full well we know that our Anglo-Nietzschean philosopher has said : " I don't glory in the Crucifixion ; I think it was a deplorable and thoroughly objectionable proceeding. . . . I believe nothing has done more to prevent the spread of Christian doctrine than the substitution of morbid interest in the sensational execution of Jesus for intelligent comprehension of His views."

We know all this, but we know something more from the deepest personal experience—that by that death we are so intimately united to Christ that, though we may not have " an intelligent comprehension of His views," whatever that may mean, we are conscious of His nearness to us. Our " morbid interest " in His death has removed the barrier of sin between us and God, and we are now able, falteringly and feebly, by His life and power within us, to live in harmony and union with Him. Let the logic-choppers reason about it as they will, let them talk sagely about mere " subjective impressions," we know this as a fact, based upon the surest personal experience.

This carries us a step farther. Evangelicalism stands not only for the centrality of the Cross ; it maintains that it is not by any means enough to assent to the historic fact of the death of Christ and the significance of that act. It goes very much farther. It holds that it is not only desirable, but vitally necessary to real living religion, that the individual should have personal dealings with, and personal experience of, the world's Redeemer. It is not only possible to touch Him, we insist that we *must* do so if we are to receive " forgiveness of our sins and all other benefits of His Passion."

Evangelicalism has often been accused of being mere individualism run mad, of having lost sight of the corporate side of religion. We are not careful to defend ourselves against these charges. Its history in Christian work denies that it has come to disaster from either of these imaginary errors. But we stand fast for this : the individual soul to receive the full blessing of pardon must come face to face with the Saviour ; He must take each one "apart from the multitude" and alone with Him, impart to him His pardon, His power, and His life.

In a word, we believe that Christianity is not a mere creed to be believed or an ethical system to be followed. We believe that primarily it is individualistic ; that each soul stands apart from others in God's sight, and that there must be conscious personal dealing with God, issuing in constant personal experience of His power and peace in the heart. Christianity we know has its corporate side, but we have little fear that this will be lost sight of. The sense of kinship will naturally draw believers together, but to be effective this bond must be one which unites *believers in Christ* and not mere *assenters to a creed*.

It is the fashion to groan somewhat over one's own time. We do not know whether these days are any more irreligious than the days gone by ; we incline to think they are rather better days now. But in any case we are sure that the condition necessary to the reawakening of deeper religious life in the community is the revival of personal religion, and real vital personal religion can only be built upon an intimate personal experience of God, the conviction that the soul had, and has, intercourse with the Unseen.

We modern Evangelicals, as we shall see later on, have travelled, no doubt, some distance beyond our fathers in many respects : maybe they might regard us as very dubious characters, and perhaps repudiate their offspring. But we steadily refuse to deny our parentage. They stood for the principles we have tried to make clear, and we stand for them to-day. Men still need to be "brought to Christ" ; for what is

that but a time-honoured phrase which means what we have been saying, that the need of all needs in the Christian Church to-day is for the soul to meet its Saviour face to face and receive from Him the life-giving touch. In this comfortable world the Gospel for "blood-bought sinners" may seem to some out of place, but it is a Gospel the world needs, and never needed it more than to-day.

Some time ago we remember hearing one of the most acute minds of to-day criticizing the Evangelical position. He pointed out that one most serious defect was the use of such phrases as these from the pulpit. He complained that such terms conveyed nothing to the hearers; they were words in an unknown tongue. We hold no brief for the use of mere cant expressions from the pulpit, nor do we believe that such phrases jerked out to congregations serve any good purpose. But we deny that they are not understood. There is no cruder theology anywhere than that of the Salvation Army; its preaching consists very largely in the reiteration of such phrases. Can anyone maintain that their audiences do not understand? Intelligent understanding there may not be, but facts prove that they have an instinctive appreciation of what they hear.

Let our critics say what they will, the world of to-day has not got beyond the old Evangel, and by that Evangel we stand or fall, for it is the very *raison d'être* of our position. We believe that it finds men to-day, that it is the only message of hope to an awakened soul. We believe it is the only thing which will stir up an indifferent world, or arouse in it the sense of the guilt of sin.

To some, as in Apostolic days, the preaching of the Cross may be foolishness, but to others we know that it is life, pardon, peace, and joy. Yes, so strongly do we feel this that we can take the words of St. Paul to ourselves, and say, "If we preach any other Gospel, let us be anathema."

Liberal we are in many other respects, but we have not moved one foot from this rock, and we believe that the day we do so our candle will be taken away.