

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

II.—WHAT EVANGELICALISM IMPLIES.

ENOUGH has been said to show that the Evangelical position is fundamentally and essentially religious and doctrinal. Primarily it has no special concern in other matters. We steadily refuse to define our standpoint in terms of ritual, for instance. We know that we are commonly misunderstood as a section of Churchmen who are conspicuous for a prejudice against elaborate ceremonial and spectacular worship.

This is quite wrong. The most elaborate ceremonial need not *necessarily* conflict with our views in the smallest degree, for our whole standpoint is purely spiritual, and in theory it may be expressed outwardly, according to the needs of the worshipper, in the plainest and homeliest way or in the most striking and even dramatic fashion. But *in practice* we find ourselves in conflict with much of the prevalent ritual.

This ritual is objectionable to us not because it is ritual. We recognize fully that the artistic makes a strong appeal to many minds, and we protest earnestly that no attempt must be made to condemn Evangelicalism eternally to a drab and dull form of worship. Ritualistic Evangelicalism is in no sense a contradiction in terms, any more than, for instance, is Patriotic Socialism. It may be that some day Evangelicalism will develop a ritual of its own, even more striking and picturesque than that to which it now objects.

It is not mere prejudice or personal taste that makes us view with anxiety the type of service seen in some of our churches to-day; it is principle. We believe that these things from which we dissent are the by-products of doctrines which cut across the fundamental truths for which we stand.

[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.]

Let us say again that we are not indulging in an onslaught on the opinions of other people, but only seeking to make clear the position for which we stand, and we will now venture to illustrate our point.

Take, for instance, the use of the sacrificial vestments. Our deep-rooted aversion from these things originates from no Puritanical prejudice. Anything which lends dignity and solemnity to the Eucharistic Feast is, in our judgment, most proper. But these particular garments have a peculiar significance. Their users would be the first to admit that this is so. They are valued by those who employ them simply because of their significance, and we should be wronging those from whom we dissent if we accused them of throwing an apple of discord into the Church for no real reason.

They are the insignia of a view of the Holy Communion which we firmly believe is derogatory to the Sacrifice of Christ on Calvary. We know that they are used with the intention of identifying our Communion Service with the Mass in the Roman Church, and, without going so far as to say that all who use them in our Church hold sacramental views identical with the Romanists, we do believe that, at the very least, they suggest a dangerous approximation to those views. And what is the Roman view? We quote from a standard Roman Catholic work :

“The Will of Christ, to manifest His gracious condescension to us in the Eucharist, forms no less an integral part of His great work than all besides, and in a way so necessary, indeed, that, whilst we here find the whole scheme of Redemption reflected, *without it the other parts would not have sufficed for our complete Atonement.* . . . In this last portion of the great Sacrifice for us” (*i.e.*, in the Eucharist) “all the other parts are to be present, and applied to us : in this last part of the objective Sacrifice, the latter becomes subjective and appropriated to us. *Christ on the Cross is still an object strange to us* : Christ, in the Christian worship, is our property, our victim. There He is the universal victim—here He is the victim for us in particular,

and for every individual amongst us ; there He was only the victim—here He is the victim acknowledged and revered ; there the objective Atonement was consummated—here the subjective Atonement is partly fostered and promoted, partly expressed.”¹

We do not propose to discuss this view in any detail, but only to point out that any suggestion that the Holy Communion contributes in any way to the completion of the Atonement is something which we could not accept without lying to our own souls and committing treachery against our most intimate and precious belief. It is for this reason that the sacrificial vestments are an offence to us—because they are part of the machinery employed to advance these sacramental views.

Or take, again, the High Anglican practice of Sacramental Confession. Here we have a practice which comes into direct collision with our belief. Though the dark history of this practice would naturally make us extremely cautious, yet this is not the *basis* of our objection to it. Many good things have been abused. But we stand for the positive truth that the redeemed man is a child of God. Christ is to Him so intimate and near, that we have not only no need of any human intermediary in our transactions with God, but we feel that any such intervention argues a lack of confidence in Him and slights His love.

So we might go on illustrating that the Evangelical recoil from many of the tendencies in our Church to-day is based upon root principles, and not upon morbid fear of Rome. But we turn from this distasteful subject to something more congenial.

We pointed out in the previous paper that the heart and core of Evangelicalism was belief in the complete efficacy of the Death of Christ to achieve for us pardon and deliverance from our sins and to unite us to God, and that the knowledge of our forgiveness and acceptance by God is the surest thing of which we are conscious.

¹ “Symbolism or Doctrinal Differences,” by J. A. Moehler, ed. 1906, pp. 238, 239.

We are not only jealous for this truth in such a way as to make us repudiate everything which conflicts with it in the smallest degree, but our loyalty to it operates in another way. It has bred in us a strong sense of spiritual kinship with all who agree with us on this point. We feel we are of the same blood with them. They have found pardon and peace at that Cross ; they worship the same Saviour ; their experience of His peace and power is identical with ours. To deny our brotherhood with them would be equivalent to denying our Parentage. We differ from them in many ways, as do the children of any earthly family. Our tastes are dissimilar ; our ways of expressing ourselves are diverse ; our sense of the proper proportion of many important matters differs, often sharply, from theirs ; but this we can never lose sight of : they are our kith and kin. Our common birth cries out for a closer union ; instinct draws us to them. Just because of the Holy and Blessed Thing which we have in common with them, we deplore everything which stirs up contention, for we feel that it is the Voice of the Father within us which cries out : "Ye are brethren. Why do ye these things ?"

This is the mainspring of the increasing movement among us for closer union, and it is this which makes us lament the family quarrels which keep us apart, and are such a fruitful cause of scandal and spiritual ineffectiveness. We do not expect for a moment that we shall ever all see eye to eye. This would mean the sacrifice of all individuality. But a better understanding, a closer union, issuing in a federation of all Evangelical Christians, is surely not too much to hope and pray for. Can we not work together and pray together ? Nay, may we not, at least, from time to time invite them to kneel with us at the Lord's Table ? When we read the arguments against such intercommunion, we must candidly say that what is to us most striking is the absence of proper perspective displayed by the objectors. From arguments which suggest some grave defect in Nonconformists which imperils the soul, they range down to objections which are mere petulance.

We are quite well aware that our Nonconformist brethren frequently display animosity against us, and in extreme cases have gone out of their way to hinder our work. But even if this were universally true of them, it would be no excuse for our refusal to show a better and larger spirit. Happily, this is by no means true of even the majority of them. Could better proof of this fact be given than by the Welsh Nonconformist protest against the Disendowment of the Welsh Church—a country, be it noted, where the tension between Church and Dissent is far greater than anywhere else? Furthermore, the plea for closer spiritual fellowship would only have force with the spiritual element in Dissent, and not with the rancorous and political party.

But we must leave these points and pass on to others.

We uttered our caveat above against identifying Evangelicalism with Protestantism, not because we have the least hesitation in accepting the title, but because the two terms are in no sense synonymous. There is a Protestantism which is certainly not Evangelical, but rather rationalistic; and, as we have said, the High Churchmen and Low Churchmen of old time were Protestants to a man, from Laud down to Hoadley, but they were not Evangelicals. But Evangelicalism, as a matter of fact, is essentially Protestant. We must pause over this for a moment.

The term "Protestant" has been extraordinarily mishandled lately. Abuse and ridicule have been heaped upon it. Happily, however, "the man of independent mind, he looks and laughs at a' that." Mere abuse and hard words have no weight with him at all. He knows perfectly well that the charge that "Protestantism is a bundle of negations" is historically false. We cannot dwell upon the great truths for which the Reformers stood and suffered, but we must note two of their fundamental contentions—justification by faith and the right of private judgment. Both of these are principles common to Evangelicalism and Protestantism. Hence we are essentially Protestant. The former truth, we saw, was the central truth to

us, and the latter is the inevitable corollary from the former. For if personal faith is essential to salvation, it is clear that such faith cannot be forced; it must arise freely and spontaneously. Church and priest must stand aside, and each man must meet his God and Saviour alone. But if the individual is thus responsible for himself, he must be allowed a free conscience, for a responsible agent must have freedom of action. True belief is a voluntary act. Mere assent or unintelligent acceptance can be generated to order, but not faith.

Consequently, freedom of conscience or the right of private judgment is a necessary deduction from the doctrine of justification by faith.

We are not going to discuss at this point the limits and the extent of the authority of Bible, Church, or Creeds, but we wish to emphasize here this important point: the soul, conscience, mind, must be free. Many factors will contribute to the formation of decisions, but if God and man hold the soul responsible, that soul must have perfect freedom of choice, to accept or to reject.

Now, without dwelling further upon this fairly obvious point, we wish to say that it is just this doctrine of the right of private judgment which is the link between us Liberal Evangelicals and the Broad Churchmen. Reason and conscience, we have said elsewhere, are the great guides to truth with the Broad Churchman, and we, too, admit this. As a matter of fact, we give much more weight to certain factors which contribute to the formation of decision than they do, but the principle is common to us both.

Perhaps it is true to say that the right of conscience has been somewhat obscured amongst us, that our opinions have become somewhat hardened, and there has been a nervousness respecting inquiry and criticism. Apprehension of this kind may be well excused, but the privilege of private judgment must not be lost.

We do not, as a matter of fact, consider that there is any peculiar virtue or exceptional value in modern thought. Like

the ships of Tarshish, which brought gold and silver, ivory, apes and peacocks, to King Solomon, modern thought has mingled its contribution of good things with the ridiculous and the bizarre. But we do believe that the process of revelation is still going on. The Divine Spirit, Who guides into all truth, has not finished teaching us : the Lord, Who had many things to say, has not ceased to speak ; former times were not "able to bear" all His utterances, and our own time and future times will hear more and more of His words if we listen, if we are teachable. Hence the process of weighing and sifting and testing and discriminating must go on.

The right of private judgment, then, is a sacred part of our inheritance ; it gives elasticity and buoyancy to our thought, so that we need not be the dull and backward boys in God's School.

We Liberal Evangelicals, then, are prepared to give play to the right of private judgment ; we are determined to "try the spirits," to prove all things, and hold fast that which is good. We are Evangelicals anchored fast to certain fundamental truths by a long rope. Those truths are true for all time ; they are as dear to us as they were to our fathers, though we view them, perhaps, from a somewhat different angle. The mountain in the moonlight, at daybreak, at noontide, and at sunset, presents a somewhat different appearance. Who will dare to dogmatize as to when it is most beautiful, or as to which light makes it most majestic ? The old truths abide, but the light in which we see them is different from the light which illumined them to those who went before, and the light in which those who come after us will see them will differ yet again from ours.

But we are modern men. Christ is the same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever—unchanging in His love and His saving grace. But He is not the same in a like sense as is a beautiful piece of statuary, with its perfect but motionless limbs and immobile face. He is expressing Himself to-day ; His Divine Spirit is teaching now—not only the old truths, but new truths too. The new is not always the true ; very often it is false and crude. But why should we, therefore, fear ? The Holy Spirit

is ours to guide us into all *truth*, and if we have faith in that guiding there is no place for fear. Christ has opened our eyes in many senses ; we still only "see men as trees walking," but as the years roll by the vision clears.

Is not the spirit of inquiry, yes, even of criticism, a cause for thankfulness? No man can deny it but he who has misgivings about the certainty of the faith he believes, he who has a lurking dread that something he accepts as true may prove false on inquiry, he who has a Bluebeard's Chamber in his heart.

But surely such anxiety is both discreditable to us and dishonouring to God? We do not mean to suggest that anything but disaster and shipwreck awaits the person who without compass or chart embarks upon the sea of present-day inquiry and criticism. But we do mean that the man who has a living faith and a personal experience of Christ in his heart, and who trustfully asks His guidance and help, can go forth upon that voyage of discovery certain that he will not only not lose that which he has, but that he will gain a deeper and a fuller knowledge of the things belonging to the Kingdom of God.

Nothing is more fatal to a robust faith than the disquieting and haunting dread that things most surely believed among us are not reliable. It may be found on inquiry that readjustment is needed in some directions, that criticism and new light compel us to rearrange our thoughts and express our belief in different terms. But if this should prove to be the case, nothing can shake our personal faith in Christ and our assurance of our union with Him, for no logomachy, nor logic, nor philosophy, can overthrow that which we know from our deepest personal experience to be as true as our own existence.

"Let us once and for all have done with the apprehension that that which shines and burns among us as the very life of our life, closer to us than breathing, and nearer than hands and feet, can ever be 'disproved,' 'refuted,' or filched from us in

any way, by the digging up of an old scrap of papyrus, or the ingenious lucubrations of some German professor." So writes one of the great prophets of our day.

We need therefore have no apprehensions. This dread that faith is crumbling to pieces, and that we are soon to be left floundering in a sea of doubt and despair, is simply the creation of an hysterical imagination, fostered by timid and anxious souls who certainly *appear* to have misgivings about the security of their religion. We have no such fear. Christ was not unwilling, in the days of His flesh, to meet the honest inquirer, and why should we fear for Him to-day? The Lord who said—"Handle Me, and see," would not to-day deny the right of those who would try and examine Him, His claims and His power.

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