

## Liberal Evangelicalism: What it is and What it stands for.<sup>1</sup>

### III.—THE BIBLE.

**E**VANGELICALISM is naturally conservative, but from what we have said it will be seen that it is not necessarily intransigent. The right of private judgment prevents it from becoming stereotyped, gives it a perennial vitality and elasticity, and maintains an avenue of communication with contemporary thought.

The critical spirit of to-day has centred upon the Bible. It would be idle to deny that this severe examination to which the Scriptures have been, and are being, subjected has not caused a great deal of apprehension. But though we admit this, and admit also that this apprehension has much reason on its side, yet we are not prepared to deny the right of the critic, or to condemn his criticism as useless or mischievous. Indeed, much of the anxiety and questioning for which the more extravagant critics are responsible has served one good purpose—it has thrown the believer back upon Christ and the witness of the Holy Spirit in his heart. Chillingworth's dictum, "The Bible is the religion of Protestants," is not only wrong, but a grave error. Christ is the religion of Protestants, and the Bible is of value only as an instrument through which Christ mediates Himself to us.

We are prepared to listen to the voice of the critic, to weigh his arguments, to test his conclusions, to hold fast the good and reject the unprofitable. Our mind is open to receive new light, if there is any forthcoming, upon this as upon any other question.

The inspiration of the Bible is as real to us as to our fathers, but we find the proof of it not in any magical property it

[<sup>1</sup> 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.]

possesses, not in any miraculous method by which its contents were transmitted to men, but in its influence, its spiritual force in our hearts. Its inspiration consists in the peculiar power it has of seizing upon the Divine and spiritual part of our nature, and meeting every striving after better things. As the needle flies to the magnet, so half-awakened impulses after heavenly things, half-crushed yearnings after God, are stirred into new life and full activity when that Bible force, which we call inspiration, operates upon us.

There is no hall-mark of inspiration which the merely critical, the spiritually dead, can see : so far as such people are concerned, the Bible is as other books. Jesus of Nazareth was to unreceptive minds simply "the carpenter," but to those who were spiritually alive He was the Christ of God. So also is it with the Bible. It is, so to speak, the Divine in human form. It is its internal property which is revealed only to the spiritually receptive, wherein it is unique. There is no cause, then, for alarm if some of the popular assumptions regarding it have to be discarded, and any attempt to protect it from the free and honest application of new methods of inquiry is neither practicable nor advisable.

It would be a matter for considerable surprise, in view of all the new light thrown upon the Bible by new discoveries, if there were no such new methods. A more perfect knowledge of Hebrew, the discovery of many ancient manuscripts, the sciences of archæology, textual criticism, and comparative religion, are but a few of the fresh avenues to knowledge which have enriched our age. It would indeed be an odd thing if they had nothing to contribute to Biblical knowledge. We want to learn all that can be learnt ; we mean to keep our minds open ; and if readjustment of our views concerning the Bible is necessary in some details, we have no apprehension whatever that this will shake our belief in its inspiration.

It is true that in some subsidiary respects we do not now regard the Bible as our fathers and grandfathers did. They thought of it as one Book, homogeneous in character, verbally

exact, infallible in every detail upon which it touched, its writers controlled by the Holy Spirit in such a way that their individuality was lost, a Book Divine in the sense that the human was excluded.

We now know that the Book is a library of books, very diverse in character and in value. St. John's Gospel is on another plane from Esther, and Romans is of vastly higher value than Judges.

We know that these books were not placed side by side by any Divine command, but as the outcome of a very lengthy process in which spiritual intuition and inspired common sense played a very large part. The Canon of the Old Testament was not finally determined until after our Lord's Ascension. The Canon of the New Testament was not agreed upon till the end of the fourth century of the Christian era, and even in our own day a little uncertainty exists in some quarters. The Russian Church has some suspicion of Revelation, and the Syrian Church practically ignores some of the smaller Epistles and Revelation. Indeed, the process of forming a canon goes on unconsciously in the minds of most people, many of whom would firmly repudiate any sympathy with Biblical criticism; for several of the books of the Bible are very seldom read in private devotions, and two or three are practically, if not entirely, neglected.

The science of Textual Criticism was none too popular, but it has almost lived down its unpopularity, and its masterpiece, the Revised Version, is now received everywhere in a kindly way, if not with open arms.

But it is the so-called Higher Criticism which has met with the bitterest and most implacable hostility. This is not the place to discuss an exceedingly difficult and involved subject in detail, but some general consideration must be given to it, because the claim of the Liberals of every degree of liberality is so seriously challenged at this point.

First of all, let us say at once that we hold no brief whatever for the Higher Critic. We sit in the court in the capacity of

interested listeners, prepared to give a sympathetic hearing to both sides. If the critics have a real case, we are open-minded enough to listen ; but large assumptions and confident assertions will carry no weight with us, whichever side makes them.

Speaking generally, we feel that *sane and reverent* criticism, in both its branches, has added greatly to the value and interest of the Bible, and in no sense, so far as can be seen, has it really injured it. Quite true, the mechanical view of inspiration has suffered, but this is a gain and no loss. The human element has been disclosed to us. There was no room for this in the old view of verbal inspiration. The writer was a mere insentient tool in the Divine Author's hand. But now we can feel the beat of the human heart throughout the whole Book, we can feel the striving of the human for union and concord with the Divine, and our Bible is coming back to us more precious and dear than ever before. It is the humanity in our Divine Lord which draws us to Him. Before He could reveal the Father to us He had to assume human nature, and then, flesh of our flesh, bone of our bone, He was able "to shew us the Father." The Bible is thus emblematic of the Incarnation, and it is its human side which finds us, gathers us up, and sweeps us into the Divine aura.

Isaiah was not a mere pen in the hand of God. He was a man like us, yearning and agonizing for God, and in his self-abasement and humility God came to his soul and revealed Himself to him. What, then, does it matter whether or no the latter part of his prophecy was his work or another's? Whoever was the hero who reached that level, he was a man like us.

The history of the ancient patriarchs was not a dictation from the mouth of God mechanically committed to writing, but a living story of how men of old time strove to find God, how they succeeded, and how they sometimes failed.

The Psalms are not mere ecstatic outbursts by men in a kind of spiritual coma. We can put our finger upon the human pulse in every verse, and we can feel the beating of a human

heart, sometimes sobbing in penitence, sometimes shouting with joy, sometimes cast down, sometimes lifted up, but human, human, always human, just as we are ourselves.

Full well we know the mischief that rash and baseless assertions made by the more extravagant critics have done to many souls. But though we lament this, we cannot see that it gives any ground for wholesale condemnation of criticism. It is from Germany that this dogmatic and hectoring critical method has mainly come, and it is all of a piece with the blustering and over-confident self-assertion which we look for from that quarter.

Wellhausen has gone through the Old Testament with a blue pencil, and his disciples have followed him with a box of crayons. The result has been a polychrome Bible, which sane English criticism has laid aside with a smile of amusement. Upon the facts which they have discovered, valuable as all facts must be, they have erected a superstructure perfectly ridiculous. We have no scruples in accepting the facts and ridiculing the top-hammer.

These theological Huns have not spared the New Testament. The bombardment of Rheims Cathedral is but the military counterpart to the bullying and swaggering onslaught on the most delicate truths of our faith. To "hack a way through" their opponents is the approved method of the leading caste in Germany, and it is only to be expected that a similar attitude would be adopted in matters far less important in German eyes. Their theological professors have taken their cue from Potsdam, and the wildest and most dogmatic assertions have been made, repeated, and reiterated again and again. It is the voice of the Jub-jub; when they have said a thing three times it is truth, and must be accepted as such on pain of ridicule and the charge of ignorance. We are bidden to do a goose-step in response to their whistle!

It is hard to refrain from bitterness, for we have suffered much from the positiveness and bullying of Germany. We quite anticipate that not the least far-reaching consequence of

the present war will be a reaction against German criticism, and a calm and reverent re-examination of much which has passed for "assured results" of criticism, and Wellhausen, Pfeleiderer, Lobstein, *et hoc genus omne*, will be condemned as possessing a zeal not according to knowledge. We are bitter against these extremists because we feel that criticism of the Bible, which ought to be all gain and no loss, has been prejudiced and dishonoured. We strive to keep an open mind, but when mere *ipse dixit* is advanced as argument, it is a severe temptation to turn away in disgust.

The essential qualification for criticism of the Bible is often overlooked. We hear a great deal of the necessity for rigorous application of the historical and scientific method. With this we are in hearty agreement, and venture to repeat that we are certain that nothing but pure gain can result from such a process. But another thing needs to be borne in mind. A satisfactory and efficient critic must possess a sympathetic mind, open to the most delicate and subtle impressions. This applies to every form of criticism.

How many biographies have been rendered useless by this very want in their writers? As literary productions they are admirable, but as a portrait of their subject they are useless. Conversely, the possession of this one gift will compensate for nearly every other loss. Boswell was a shallow gossip who was frequently snubbed for his ineptitudes by the great mind he almost worshipped, but he has written a life of his hero which will live as long as English literature. Boswell's "Life of Johnson" is immortal because it is a biography written by one who, whatever his faults might be, spared no pains to study his subject. His love and his sympathy covered every defect; they enabled him to surmount every obstacle, and Dr. Johnson lives again in the work he wrote.

How much more so is this the case with the Bible? It is essentially a Book for the soul, and soulless men can no more estimate it and criticize it than a blind man could criticize art.

"We may easily idolize or under-estimate a man," says

Illingworth, "but to know him as he is—his true motives, the secret springs of his conduct, the measure of his abilities, the explanation of his inconsistencies, the nature of his esoteric feelings, the dominant principle of his inner life—this is often a work of years, and one in which our own character and conduct play quite as important a part as our undertaking: for not only must the necessary insight be the result of our own acquired capacities—which will have to be great in proportion to the greatness of the personality with which we have to deal—but there must further exist the kind and degree of affinity between us which can alone make self-revelation on his part possible."

Now it is just because we feel and know that there is a living Something in the Bible that we protest that sympathetic appreciation is indispensable to genuine and effective criticism. To apply naked historical and scientific method to the Bible is like criticizing a Beethoven symphony by testing the volume of sound it produces or counting the number of parts in the orchestration. The essential and distinctive thing in the Bible is the Living Spirit within, and the would-be critic who overlooks this is *ipso facto* disqualified for his task before he begins.

This is what we mean when we plead for *reverent* criticism. Not only have we no desire to hold back our Bible from examination even if we could. Rather do we thrust it forth for criticism of the most rigorous kind; but we maintain that the critic must have his spiritual sense highly developed. This is, when we reflect, no more unreasonable than the demand that a musical critic should understand music, otherwise the possession of the literary gift and the power to write racy critiques will result only in injustice to the work displayed for criticism. So it is not unreasonable to ask that the would-be critic should combine with the historical and scientific method a spiritual mind.

When, for instance, Professor Schmiedel tells us that, of all the many statements attributed to our Lord, in his opinion there are only nine which we can be certain He uttered, he

is laying claim to possessing a perfectly unique power of sensing the Spirit of Christ, a sympathy with His Mind so subtle that he can catch at once the false note in all else which Christ was reported to have uttered. Such an illustration of so-called critical methods is a *reductio ad absurdum*; for Professor Schmiedel, great scholar though he be, has not yet given any real evidence of possessing great prophetic and spiritual insight.

But the combination of the spiritual sense with historical and scientific method will give us scholars equal in some measure to their task, and they will supply us with results wholly helpful in the long run. We say in the long run, because to those bred and brought up in the old view of the Scripture, some mental adjustment will be necessary. Alarm may be occasioned in some cases, and the cry may go up that the anchor is dragging. Serious though this feeling of anxiety is, yet it is necessary and welcome if it recalls us to this obvious fact that it is to Christ we are anchored, and not to the Bible. Christ exists for us quite apart from the Bible. He mediates Himself to us through its reading, it is the record of His dealings with men, and therefore priceless to us, and the better understanding of that record can only enrich our spiritual life. But any revision of our estimate of the Bible surely cannot rob us of our experience of its value? We shall at the worst have to revise our definition of inspiration, but nothing can prove that the Book is not inspired, because we know perfectly well that it inspires us. We come to it as to a friend, we take up and read it, and we are conscious that God meets us in its pages. No learned talk about J, E, P, D, or Q can obscure, much less negative, that fact. We know it and rejoice in it. So far from sober inquiry into its sources and origins hindering us, once we have discarded the view that infallibility is a necessary constituent to inspiration, it aids us and stimulates us and adds to the interest and value of our reading.

But if we start with the idea that the Bible is a kind of inerrant encyclopædia of all branches of subjects—historical,



scientific, and ethnological—upon which it happens to touch, then deep anxiety and much disquietude of soul is before us.

We do not mean to suggest that all (or for that matter any) of the conclusions of sober and reverent inquirers are necessarily right. They may all be wrong, as in our judgment *some* at any rate are more than questionable. But we plead rather for this, that the mind should be kept open and unprejudiced to any new light which may be forthcoming, that we should entrench ourselves behind the position that the Bible is given us to foster the Divine Life within, that its purpose is to mediate God to our souls, and that our assurance that it fulfils this object is not dependent upon the authorship of the books of the Bible, nor upon the accuracy of its historical or scientific statements, but upon our own certain knowledge of its value to our souls, our own assurance that the Holy Spirit uses it as the most powerful instrument in dealing with our souls.

Let a man know this and he has got the Bible embedded in his soul. Intellectual processes will then move easily on their own proper plane. But let the spiritual value of the Bible become entangled with intellectual conceptions of what it *must* be if it is to be regarded as inspired, and then growing confusion or obstinate obscurantism are the only alternatives before us.

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