

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

The Need of Definiteness in Faith and Action.¹

IT is hardly necessary to demonstrate that success in any movement whether religious or other, depends largely on the definiteness with which its efforts are directed. Notwithstanding its derivation, I do not wish to use the word *definite* as denoting mere limitation. It has a positive as well as a negative sense. It is inclusive in proportion as it also excludes. Nor do I need to press the importance of the topic at the present time when we are being called to face responsibilities as grave as any that our Country has ever known. If the coming Mission is to be what we pray it may be, it must be definite in scope and detail. Repentance does not come by preaching generalities. It is an empty hope which does not get beyond speculations. And yet it is from this very fact that some of the gravest difficulties of the Mission arise.

The Bishop of London speaking lately in Convocation about the literature of the Mission, said that three classes of tracts and papers had been prepared to suit three types of Churchmanship, one which he called Catholic, the others Evangelical and Broad. He hoped that this would tend to unity. But it could do so only by erasing what was distinctive in each, and so producing indefiniteness and probably failure. I address brethren who, by the name given to their Union, profess a Churchmanship which is Catholic in a very different sense from that used by the Bishop, and is Broad in quite another way than that of those to whom he applied the name. As Evangelicals we hold to the Apostolic verities which were restored to our Church and Country at the Reformation, and have come down to us since through a succession of great divines, unrivalled for piety, learning and sound judgment. We have no difficulty in defining our faith, and by it our policy. Jewell and Usher, O'Brien and Goode, Romaine and Ryle (only to mention very few) would have lived and written in vain if we were in any doubt to-day what Evangelical doctrine is and what Evangelical life ought to be. Indeed our position has become more distinct by the very divergencies, increasing within later years, which have developed in other schools of thought within the Church.

¹ Paper read before a Conference of the Clerical and Lay Evangelical Society for the Diocese of Carlisle.

While Evangelicals have kept to the old paths, the successors of the Tractarians are trending to a pseudo-Catholicity which includes much that was never covered by the old definition *quod semper, quod ubique, quod ab omnibus*. They have, however, no lack of distinctiveness in doctrine or objective. They know what they want, and the way to work for it. Their literature frankly uses language which cannot be mistaken. The Sacrifice of the Mass, the Sacrament of Penance, Purgatory, Indulgences, Adoration of the Virgin Mary and Prayers to the Saints, are plainly taught in many recent books with a large circulation, written by clergy professing to be still members of the Church of England. We may dislike these ideals, but we are left in no doubt as to what they mean, and what is the object of those who desire them. Their efforts correspond with their beliefs. They are earnest, aggressive, persistent. They lose no opportunity for using their influence, and yield to no scruples and doubts in doing so. In short, they are definite both in their faith and their actions, and they mean to use the National Mission to secure their ends.

Quite in an opposite direction, a more modern divergence is increasing, but this is definite chiefly in its negations. It is disintegrating rather than constructive. The faith "once delivered to the saints," as every later generation has supposed, is now said to have never existed in any fixed form. Even if there has been some continuity of thought during the past, it has always been, and is still, subject to relativity of expression. At least, this is the latest opinion of a much honoured University Professor once known for his attachment to Evangelical principles. And it represents, more or less, the views of a large number of good people both in the Established Church and the Free Churches. In other words some personal element, conscience, reason, emotion, or even imagination, becomes more or less a rule of faith and a guide of life, or as it used to be called, a "verifying faculty." The old sense of the stability of the Holy Scriptures, their integrity and veracity, and consequently of the authority of the Lord to Whom they bear witness and Who bore witness to them, has to be modified to meet modern views. Much that was intensely sacred to our fathers has been thrown into the melting pot, and that not by the infidel or agnostic, but by professing Christians. Rejection of the supernatural excludes the fact of the Resurrection as much

as that of the Virgin birth, and there are many pulpits in which both these facts are ignored even when they are not openly denied. The result is, of course, a lack of that definiteness which both we and the so-called Catholics claim, though there is at the same time a very distinct substitution of humanism for super-humanism, of the psychological for the spiritual, and of defective science for true knowledge. It is still uncertain how far the Mission will appeal to this school. They would welcome it no doubt if it brought social reform and freedom from the theological restraints which the Church has hitherto imposed on her clergy.

It is not surprising that the Evangelical body has been to some extent affected by the attrition of these two opposite forces. Those who can look back over as many decades in the Ministry as I can will realize that a good deal has been altered, or perhaps we should say adopted, amongst Evangelicals since we were ordained. Most of us hold the same vital principles as our fathers did, but our methods both of preaching and practice have changed in regard to definiteness. Our conduct of public worship, for example, is very different from what would have been seen in the churches of McNeile and Miller, the elder Bickersteths and the Brighton Elliotts. I do not say that it is less devout or sincere, but it is more showy than spiritual, more extrinsic than intensive. So far as one, who is now more often in the pew than the pulpit, may judge, our witness is less definite than it was formerly. There is less doctrine and Bible exposition in our sermons, which often seem to have been hurriedly prepared. In my youth I heard more about conversion and covenants, sin and salvation than I do now: more about justification and peace with God, judgment both here and hereafter, Christian assurance and experience by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. We are frightened by that much misunderstood word "dogma." We think that we must adapt ourselves to present-day tastes and feelings. We have followed rather than led. With the best intentions this was a great mistake.

People are much more likely to be convinced by those who temperately express strong convictions than by those who keep what is called an open mind, which, as one of the many stories about Archbishop Temple relates, was in his opinion much the same as having no mind at all.

There is a movement among some of our younger men which

incurs this danger. I would not call it a secret Society, though in some respects it has the appearance of one. Its general attitude is one of impatience with the definiteness of our position as it has come to us from those known as the Evangelical fathers. It is ready to surrender with non-essentials much also that used to be thought essential. The Evangelical teaching which remains is consequently weakened, and cannot have the vigour and vitality of that which springs unadulterated from the fountain head.

If the divergencies or developments to which I have referred affect no revealed truth, and if they come fairly within the principles of our Church, as set forth in the Prayer Book and Articles, then in such a crisis as the present, it is a waste of time to discuss them, and it is far worse to be divided or to quarrel over them. But if we are convinced that they touch the foundations of the Christian faith, that they contradict the teaching of "God's Word written," as read in its natural sense, then loyalty to Him, Who is there revealed, and to the Church of our fathers, which has taken that Word as her Rule of Faith, compels us to meet with a firm and definite refusal all that obscures or disparages that faith. Moreover, surrender of any fraction of this heritage is in such a case as foolish as it is wrong. Each concession invites further demands, and refusal becomes more difficult at every later stage.

I am profoundly convinced that the success of the National Mission will depend mainly on the purity and plainness of its witness. To bring in the second-hand furniture of Rome will be as fatal as to employ the clipped coinage of Anglo-German criticism. Disaster must come from either, and a Mission that failed after elaborate profession and preparation would be worse than no Mission at all. If we could all agree to determine, as St. Paul did, not to know anything among our people "save Jesus Christ and Him crucified," if our fellow Churchmen on each side of us were willing to drop everything else but that which the Holy Spirit has taught in the Word, and unite with us in preaching "Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God," then such blessing would come that all England could not hold it nor the world beside.

Will my readers bear with me, if I illustrate my plea for definiteness in two or three particulars.

I.

The first is the question of Authority. We know exactly how our Church has defined it, and we know how others on either side of our position have deviated from it. We have heard from Anglican clergy the Roman quibble about "the Church before the Bible," and the inferences which they have drawn from it. We are familiar also with the suggestions of those who regard the Old Testament as largely a collection of myths, and talk about the Judaism of St. Paul. Our people also hear a good deal of the same sort. But have we been careful so to teach positive and constructive truth about the Bible, that such inventions, which, as an ancient Preacher has told us, are the instinct of fallen man, have no effect but to excite pity and prayer for the inventors?

My connexion with the Bible League has not only shown me how widespread is the weakening of that old regard for Holy Scripture, which was the priceless asset of former days, and also how the poison has filtered down from the lecture room to the pulpit, and the press, and then to the people, but it has shown me as well how the mischief may be tactfully and effectively met. There has been a welcome response to our efforts, and in some quarters signs of a healthy reaction.

With this same object I would urge my brethren to encourage in their parishes more devotional and textual study of the Bible, and of the accumulating evidences, external and internal, of its integrity. With this let them promote the revival of family worship, including the reading of the Scriptures, preceded by a collect or prayer for the illumination of the Holy Spirit.

It is true that we can no more define Inspiration than we can define Incarnation. But we can assert the fact of one as positively as we can of the other. And we can affirm with assurance that the Inspiration of the Bible is not merely a form of human genius more or less highly developed, but is a demonstrable phenomenon, just as we affirm that by the Incarnation we have not merely a Saviour, but a Saviour Who is Emmanuel.

II.

My second point has reference to the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. It may seem strange that after more than

three hundred years of an open Bible there should be a single Englishman who should have any misconceptions on such a topic. And yet they are frequent. Some of us affirm that on each occasion when a priest celebrates the Eucharist, Christ is present in the consecrated elements, and that a sacrifice is thereby made for cleansing of sin, as that on Calvary. Others who refuse this, go in another direction and assert that it was part of His humiliation on earth to be subject to the current errors of the day, and that at least in His eschatological teaching He was misled by Rabbinic influences. I have been told by several well-known Evangelical clergy that they could not accept His witness to the Old Testament as a supreme standard, and that His references to Moses and Jonah as historical persons were not enough to prove the fact.

It is certain that if the Messengers of the Mission are under either condition of such thoughts, their preaching of Christ will have little effect.

We want something much more divinely definite. Many of us who do not err in either of these ways fail to preach a full Christ. Their sermons do not give to Him the prominence which the Bible gives. References to the Messianic hope in history and type, psalm and prophet, are rare or incidental. The effectual grace of His Atonement, the power of His Resurrection, and yearning for conformity to His life, which fill so largely the Apostolic letters, have a much smaller place in our discourses than they should have. I often hear and read sermons in which the figure of the Saviour is dim and indistinct, and there is little said of Him to convict the sinner, comfort the inquirer, or build up the believer. And yet it is only that witness to Him and the exceeding riches of His grace, such as the first preachers gave, which the Holy Spirit will honour with like results. These results are as possible even now as then. The ages have not altered the divine character or the divine conditions. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and to-day and for ever.

The same as He was in the glory which He had with the Father before the world was, the same as on the Cross, for God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself, the same in the Resurrection, which declared Him to be the Son of God with power, the same now upholding all things, the same as He will be when He comes for His saints, and when He comes by His divine authority

to judge the nations of the world. Indeed there is no subject in Scripture from the beginning to the end described more fully, more definitely, or with such emphasis and precision, than the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. He is in everything first and last, Alpha and Omega, the author and finisher of our Faith. Only by the preaching of that Christ can men be saved, and Ministers who fail to preach thus, sin against Him as much as they do against their own souls and the souls committed to their care.

III.

One other subject only can I refer to now. But this equally with the former is one about which there is no lack of instruction and definition in Scripture, though it is not often recognized as fully as it should be. If there can be no revival without the preaching of Jesus Christ, certainly there cannot be without the power of the Holy Spirit. None of us, I presume, wherever we are in the Bishop of London's category, would deny the personality and functions of the third Person of the Holy Trinity. Yet I am sure there is a good deal of vagueness of thought and consequent silence in our ministry about His presence and work.

It is true the word "spiritual" has become very common, especially in the literature of the Mission, but it is often used with ambiguity, and writers do not make it clear whether by it they mean the spirit of man or the Spirit of God. No such indefiniteness exists in the Scriptures. While we use the word sometimes quite apart from a religious sense, and sometimes in a quasi religious sense to describe human emotions not necessarily controlled by the Holy Ghost, the real spirituality of which the Bible speaks cannot be mistaken. The spiritual man is one who has been born again and is dwelt in by the Spirit. Nothing can be more precisely described than the distinction which St. Paul draws in 1 Corinthians ii. between the spiritual and the "natural man." But the whole subject is far too large for me to deal with here, I can only suggest some definite points which need to be emphasized with reference to the Mission and for the consideration of my brethren.

- (1) The Personality and Character of the Holy Spirit.
- (2) The condition of His coming and to whom He is given.
- (3) The threefold purpose for which He has come, and its relation in each aspect to Christ. (St. John xvi. 8-11.)

(4) His witness to Christ, and in and through the believer as the Spirit of Truth and Life.

(5) His communication with human intelligence, feeling and will.

(6) His action in quickening, directing, fruit giving, sanctifying, enabling and evidential.

IV.

There is much more that I might be tempted to say in the same direction, but I trust that I have sufficiently maintained my thesis. A great opportunity lies before the Church of England, not so large indeed as might have been taken, but large enough to tax all its powers. But the Church will fail if it loses its balance by lack of God-given definiteness. Its equilibrium will not be found by leaning to one side or the other, or to each in turn. Safety can only be assured under the direct and definite guidance of the Holy Spirit, as He has given it in the Sacred Scriptures. It is this central line which Evangelicals believe that they hold. That they do so is no cause for self-praise. It is rather a call to greater responsibility, a fuller consecration, and a stauncher steadfastness. The truth we hold is no discovery made by us; we hold it because God has made it known; and we hold it, therefore, in trust for Him and for our fellow men.

Dr. Forsyth has lately said well :—" Christianity is a statement about a self-given God and not a seeking religion; a statement which conveys the knowledge of His relation to us, and expresses our relation to Him; a statement, therefore, which has its source in Him and not in us."

And again :—" A Church that lives on its sympathies rather than its beliefs, upon sentiment rather than justification, has neither power with God nor permanence with men."

If others can show that wherein they differ from us they do so on the same Authority as that to which we submit, and that by this Authority we are in error, either by defect or addition, then straightway let us repent and thankfully accept whatever truth we have neglected. But it must be God's own truth as He gave it of old. To no other authority dare we yield. "To the law and to the Testimony" is our watchword, as it was of our fathers; so that "whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby,

is not to be required of any man as an article of the Faith." And if that which we hold and preach is according to the Word of God, and if we have neither added thereto nor taken aught from it, then let us go on in confidence, as better men have done before us, unmoved by frowns or favours, and let the grand old words which our fathers so often sang be ours also.

O make but trial of His love,
 Experience will decide
 How blest are they, and only they,
 Who in His truth confide.

Fear Him, ye saints, and you will then
 Have nothing else to fear ;
 Make you His service your delight,
 Your wants shall be His care.

H. E. Fox.

