

## The Church of England and the Evangelical Spirit.

THESE familiar words of St. Paul—"I am not ashamed of the gospel: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth"—are not chosen as an ornamental prefix, they are no mere pious irrelevancy; they have an intimate connexion with the subject before us—"The Church of England and the Evangelical Spirit."

The word "Evangelical" will recall to most minds the memory of that great movement of the eighteenth century which awoke the Church of England to a new life, or it may suggest that school of thought within the Church which has inherited the traditions of the great Revival. But the Evangelical Spirit did not originate in the eighteenth century: it has been in the Church from the beginning: nay, it may be traced further back yet. It is the very spirit of the prophets who sought to remove the emphasis in religion from the externals of worship to the attitude of the heart, who strove to train the people not in the due observance of ceremonies, but in right ideas of God. Upon St. Paul pre-eminently the mantle of the Prophets fell. And yet there was a difference. For the Incarnation means nothing less than a Revolution: all history takes a fresh start from Christ: He "makes all things new."

So it was a new evangel that the apostles proclaimed. Christ was their gospel, the supreme revelation of the Father. Endued with His Spirit, and devoted to His cause they went forth to carry the torch of the gospel into the thickest darkness of heathenism; and the fire which was kindled in the earliest days of Christianity has never died out. The Evangelical Spirit has been a permanent heritage in the Church. At times indeed it has smouldered low, and might almost seem to have been quenched.

In our own Church, it burned brightly in the days of the early Celtic missions: it gleamed forth again in the age of the Friars and of Wycliffe: it broke out strongly at the Reformation and again burst into fervent flame with the preaching of Wesley and Whitfield. And from their days the work has been handed on in constant succession by that school of thought which is known as Evangelical.

But, I take it, it is not our present aim to trace the history of a party, but rather to examine the spirit of Evangelicalism and to inquire into its principles.

Now, at the outset, it seems necessary to clear the ground by two negations.

In the first place, Evangelicalism is not the same thing as Low Churchmanship. Historically the name "Low Churchman" has quite a distinct origin, dating back to the beginning of the eighteenth century, when it was applied to the fox-hunting parsons who paid much attention to their social connexions and as little as possible to their ecclesiastical duties. Unfortunately the two types have become confused in the minds of many people, and Evangelicalism has suffered from the association. But essentially there is no connexion between Evangelicalism and slovenliness; on the contrary, any student of the Evangelical revival of the eighteenth century cannot fail to be struck by the fact that its leaders were strict to obey the rules of the Prayer Book, and did a great deal to re-establish decency and order in the conduct of public worship.

In the second place, Evangelicalism is not synonymous with a merely negative Protestantism. Though from time to time Evangelical Churchmen have been driven into controversy and have opposed doctrines and practices which seemed to be contrary to the teaching of the Apostles and to the principles of the Reformation settlement, yet they have never altogether forgotten that their vocation is to preach a positive evangel, that it is not the presence of ceremonial or its absence that is of vital importance, that it is not circumcision that "availeth anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation."

So properly Evangelicalism stands for the proclamation of a positive evangel.

But, it may be urged, is not this true of the whole Church of Christ? Yes, indeed, all Christians are called to be witnesses, to be salt and light in the world. Yet there are certain aspects of the truth, which it has been the special contribution of Evangelicals to emphasize: and to these we must now turn our attention, and ask, what are the characteristic notes of Evangelicalism?

Now, I believe that we find them summarized, or at least adumbrated, in the words of St. Paul quoted at the head of this article which indeed form the keynote of the whole Epistle to the Romans,

the thesis which St. Paul works out in the following chapter—"I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth." And, notice that the correspondence which we shall seek to trace between the Apostle's teaching and the tenets of Evangelicalism is no accidental or arbitrary coincidence: there is a direct and fundamental relationship. For it was the reading of Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans that led to the conversion of John Wesley and so was the means of bringing about the great Revival.

In the first place, St. Paul says that he is not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the "*Power of God*," that is to say, its power lies in its divine origin: it is not a means of salvation devised by man, it is the "gospel of the *grace* of God." Now this is exactly the point that Evangelicalism is constantly bringing to the front, that salvation is not man's achievement, but God's free gift: man is impotent to do or to be what God wills in his own strength, he must look away from himself and receive in faith what God offers.

The presentation of this truth is not, of course, confined to one section of the Church alone: it is constantly being borne witness to in the sacraments and proclaimed by men of very different types in the Church: but for all that, it remains true that the emphasis upon this fundamental doctrine of Christianity is eminently characteristic of the Evangelical spirit. Witness only the typical hymns of the Revival—

"Other refuge have I none,  
Hangs my helpless soul on Thee". . .  
"All my trust on Thee is stayed,  
All my help from Thee I bring."

or again—

"Not the labours of my hands  
Can fulfil Thy law's demands,"  
"Nothing in my hand I bring,  
Simply to Thy Cross I cling."

Now,—to turn for a short space to a side issue,—this emphasis laid on Grace has led to two doctrines which have sometimes been exaggerated or misunderstood. On the one hand, it has tended to produce Calvinism or at least Augustinianism: it has made some men lose sight of the necessity of co-operation on man's part.

Consequently among Evangelicals there have been those who have adopted a rigid theory of election: but this is not to be re-

garded as a characteristic of the whole body, for it has found as many opponents as champions.

The other doctrine which, when rightly understood, is seen to be vitally associated with the doctrine of grace, is more truly typical of Evangelicalism: it is the doctrine of Assurance, which has often been regarded as the fruit of presumption and self-confidence, whereas in reality it has sprung from the desire to focus the attention not on man at all, but on God's almighty power. It is born of a grand confidence that "if God be for us" nought can be against us; "He that spared not His own Son but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him freely give us all things?" "He which hath begun a good work in you, will perfect it until the day of Jesus Christ."

Then St. Paul goes on, "the gospel is the Power of God *unto salvation*." The free gift of God is salvation: the burden of the gospel is man's deliverance, it is good news for a lost world. Jesus Christ came "to seek and to save that which was lost." Hence it is characteristic of Evangelicalism to regard Christianity primarily as a religion of Redemption. Therefore the atonement occupies the central position. "Calvary is the only spot from which a true view of Sinai and Bethlehem and Olivet can be obtained." This belief in the Cross as the culmination of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ we may take as the second of the characteristic marks of Evangelicalism. It was the very kernel of the preaching of John Wesley: it was the secret of the philanthropic fervour of Wilberforce and Shaftesbury: it is the fountain-head of the missionary Society to-day. "The love of Christ constraineth us because we thus judge that One died for all." This point was emphasized recently by one of the Church newspapers. "Perhaps, above all," it said, "we have to thank the Evangelical movement for the prominence which its sure grasp of the fundamental truths has led it to give to the cause of Foreign Missionary work. Of course, the Evangelicals have not been alone in this: but they have for many years past realized the primacy and urgency of this claim as no other section of the Church, taken as a whole, has done."<sup>1</sup>

And so St. Paul continues—the gospel is "the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." And here, I believe, the apostle brings out not only

<sup>1</sup> *The Challenge*, January 16, 1916.

the universal application of the gospel, but also the terms of its application. It is to "*every one that believeth.*" If a man come in the right attitude of faith he may have "boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus." That privilege is no longer limited to the High-priest. Because of the finished work of Christ, the way is open and free: "we may, we must draw near."

And here we find the third, and perhaps the chiefest, characteristic mark of Evangelicalism, in the assertion of the right of direct access of every individual to God through Jesus Christ. "There is one mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus"—and no other. This truth Evangelicals have stoutly maintained, in spite of all opposition. In the worship of God, they put no stress on *place*—men can meet with God in the market-place or by the river-side no less than in the sanctuary: they put no stress on *ceremony*—no ritual form must be required as a *sine qua non*: they put no stress on *priest*—there is no need of any human mediator. Do not mistake my meaning. Ministry, sanctuary and ceremony are necessary to order, but they are not necessary to salvation. Good and helpful as they are indeed, if they serve their purpose, they are not essential *as between God and man*. For every one direct access to God is available through our Lord Jesus Christ. Because of Him, confession of sin is made to God direct, forgiveness is ready to hand, the presence of God is immediate. It is as Brother Lawrence found when he wrote "The time of business does not with me differ from the time of prayer: and in the noise and clatter of my kitchen, while several persons are at the same time calling for different things, I possess God in as great tranquillity as if I were upon my knees at the blessed Sacrament." The monk did not on that account neglect the Sacrament: neither does the wise Evangelical. But he did not limit the operation of the Spirit of God to that means of grace. Whether it be in the trenches or in the jungles of Africa,

" Spirit with spirit can meet ;  
Closer is He than breathing,  
Nearer than hands and feet."

Here then are the characteristic notes of Evangelicalism—Christianity and religion of Redemption, salvation the free gift of God, access to God direct. What a message! Truly we can say with St. Paul, we are "not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God

unto salvation to every one that believeth." It is powerful: it is a dynamic force: its value then can be appraised.

What is the verdict of experience. "By their fruits," said our Lord, "ye shall know them." Let the history of the great Revival bear witness. Here is a tale to thrill and to inspire. Read of the awakening of spiritual life, that changed the face of England—two or three thousand people listening to John Wesley preaching in the open-air at five o'clock on an October morning, the churches crowded to overflowing, aristocrats and pitmen alike forsaking a sinful life for one of godliness. Read of the revival of organized Church life under those early Evangelicals, who introduced daily services, and early celebrations, who were the first to adopt Sunday Schools, and all that has come to be recognized as the necessary machinery of a well-worked parish. Read of Champneys of Whitechapel, called the "pioneer of the modern type of parochial organization," or of Grimshaw, whose country church could scarcely hold its thousand communicants. Or again, read of the social and philanthropic work that was set on foot under their influence—prison visitation, the reform of mad-houses, the abolition of the slave-trade. Recall only the names of Wilberforce, of Buxton and of Shaftesbury.

And what of to-day? is this the glory of the past alone? has the work of these leaders been accomplished? Some tell us that it has, that their message has been assimilated by the Church of England as a whole. But is this the case? In reply, we need only point to the large body in our Church—larger now than ever before—who are proud to consider themselves the heirs and trustees of the early Evangelicals. These would rejoice, indeed, if it were true that the principles of their fathers had been assimilated by the Church and if the spirit of Evangelicalism permeated the whole. They do not remain members of the Church merely to push the interests of a party. They are loyal, satisfied members of the Church of England, Catholic, Protestant and Reformed: they are convinced that all the essential elements of true spiritual religion are to be found within their beloved Church. But they believe that they still have a witness to bear, a deposit to guard, a message to pass on, delivered them by their fathers.

And so we face the future without fear. The crisis through which we are passing is putting all things to the test, tearing away

conventionalities and revealing born reality. But we are glad rather than anxious. We speak of reconstruction, and in some form it is bound to come; but the Gospel needs no reconstruction. Doubtless we shall interpret and apply it in new and more living ways, but the fundamentals must remain. And the question may well be asked, Dare we meet the difficulties of the present time and the problems that crowd upon us unless we take our stand upon these three great truths?—the truth that before and behind everything lies the grace of God, that from eternity He “so loved that He gave,” the truth that this gift of God is redemptive, that it is able to save the world from its pride and selfishness and cruelty, and the truth that God’s grace is ready to hand, made accessible to all in Jesus Christ our Lord.

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