

EVANGELICALS AND THE BIBLE.

BY THE REV. CANON STUART H. CLARK, M.A.; Vicar and
Rural Dean of Tonbridge, Kent.

THE distinctive place which the Bible holds in the doctrine and worship of the Church of England is familiar ground to all. The formularies bear constant and unvarying witness to its unique authority. But there are special reasons, both in history and in individual experience, why the Evangelical School must *maintain* this witness in our modern world. Other schools of thought find much of their stability and strength in Church order, or in human thought; but for Evangelicals, their past traditions, present experience and future hopes gather round the Bible. When "Greece rose from the dead with the New Testament in her hands" the Evangelical Reformation was already on its way; and the whole history of Protestantism records the protest of their spiritual Fathers, not primarily against specific errors, but on behalf of (*pro*) the supremacy of the Word of God.¹ Their very life is at stake if they let slip this mooring. For Evangelicals, the Bible contains the Word of Life.

I

But nowadays we are witnessing the neglect of it on many sides. The Board of Education Committee has told us that the Bible is less widely read and less directly influential in our life and literature to-day than at any time since the Reformation.

If anything can summon Evangelicals to unity amongst themselves, an authoritative generalization of this kind should do it. The present generation of Evangelicals have behind them an early training in the Bible whose fragrance will abide with them through life. But it is not always so with their sons.

It is probable too that we are witnessing a great return to Roman ideas of the Church and Sacrament, largely through disuse of the Bible by the average layman. Rome has always disparaged the use of the Bible by her people, for purposes of her own. With deep sagacity Rome knows that man will always demand some support and guide *outside* himself; and, withdrawing the Bible, offers itself and its priesthood. England is getting ready rapidly for that doctrine and discipline, when the Bible is neglected or denied. Sons of the Reformation will desire to restore an intelligent and affectionate use of the Bible to the English people, as one great barrier against Rome, and the modern movement in that direction.

It would serve no useful purpose to discuss here the reasons for modern neglect. It is, no doubt, largely due to excess of new

¹ Cf. Dean Wace, *Principles of the Reformation*, pp. 3-23.

light pouring in from every side ; and in that light the old familiar paths have a strange look. It is the simple truth that young and old alike are being subjected to a new and severe trial of faith. It is inevitable in a time like ours of intellectual ferment and change, in many ways similar to that portrayed in the Epistle to the Hebrews, as Bishop Westcott suggests. Our task, therefore, is to secure and present some coherent and steadying view of the Bible true alike to the old and the new.

The Conservative and Liberal attitude of mind stand facing each other, and it would not be difficult to support the contention that the thoroughgoing Conservative and thoroughgoing Liberal positions are equally impossible. On one side, Liberals must admit that there is some permanent residuum, some definite sacrosanct area of truth on which Christianity must stand, if it is to be the Christianity of Christ. That area, of course, needs careful definition, but its very existence cannot be denied. But some thoroughgoing Liberalism has given just offence by refusing to acknowledge any ultimate of truth, any irreducible minimum of Christian Faith, and has tossed every belief into the crucible of modern thought, from which has emerged a religion something less than Christian.

On the other hand, new knowledge has come to light, and in so far as it is truth, it has come from the God of all truth and cannot be denied. The duty of the true Conservative is, first, to assure himself how far modern knowledge is true,—much of it is partial truth or even private opinion,—and then to see how far it is really inconsistent with the old. But the thoroughgoing Conservative has given just offence by refusing to acknowledge frankly the possibility of new light upon the sacred page, and by declining the imperative duty of finding, when necessary, its candid reconciliation with the old.

As usual, it is the extremists who trouble us, men who will not even try to disentangle those elements of truth which give strength and permanence to each position, and strive to unite them in the higher synthesis of the ‘truth as it is in Jesus.’

“Alike from stubborn rejection of new revelation, and from hasty assurance that we are wiser than our fathers,”

“Save us and help us, we humbly beseech Thee, O Lord.”

II

The ultimate problem of all life in its last analysis lies in the relation and interaction of the human and the divine ; and this is especially true of spiritual life in all its forms. To put it broadly, “How much of God, and where ?” “How much, and what of man ?” in all our spiritual strivings. Probably, in the ultimate they may prove to be one, but the division is clear according to the teaching of Our Lord. Caesar and God have, for purposes of thought at least, distinct problems and areas of obligation, though in practice they so often run up into one. It is the final problem of man himself and his history, of Christ, of the Church and of Sacrament, and,

especially for us, here and now, of the Bible. What is of man, and what is of God, and how do they combine ?

There are three views of inspiration which we must consider :

(i) God pours into the minds of men His Divine thoughts and messages in a *definite* form.

This view involves verbal inspiration and all its points of weakness and of strength. Like Dr. Pusey, some cannot at once reject, with ease and certainty, verbal inspiration. The same God who set fast the strong mountain made the tiny flower blossom on its slope. Are only the great outlines of truth in the Bible true, while its details are wrong ? Is harmony perfect while its notes are false ? Bishop Westcott's love of precision and accuracy has taught us to find profound spiritual truth in enclitics, and aorists and arrangement of words. All this and much else may make us not quite so certain of the position which throws verbal inspiration finally away. Still there is much against it which need not be urged here. Literalism is not the best interpreter of genius, in religion, or in any other sphere.

(ii) On the other side, there is the view of inspiration as a great stream of Truth, Beauty and Love, pouring out from God, impinging on human life, and caught by all those human minds and souls that are sensitive to Divine movement. Consciously by prophets ; less consciously perhaps by poets, artists and philosophers, truth is expressed by them all for humanity at large. This view will not distinguish between the inspiration of the Bible or of Browning. It is merely a matter of degree and of expression. Each man receives into himself some part of the great stream and expresses it aloud for men. This view is very widespread and may prevail. Anyway, we shall have to reckon with it. The great difficulty in it is to maintain any standard which can gauge the sincerity of the man, and his spiritual quality, i.e., his nearness to God. We shall require something to correspond with the canon of scripture, some general 'Christian Consciousness,' which can test the revelation by the norm. It may be argued that that consciousness exists to-day, as it existed once ; that true inspiration will still, in Coleridge's memorable phrase, "find" men ; that it is capable of development, and is qualified to recognize the spiritual values of modern inspiration while refusing it perhaps to the older forms. In any case, we do well to keep this view in sight, and watch whither we are being led by the modern mind.

(iii) A third view stands between these two and seeks to conserve the element of truth in both. It combines the frank acknowledgment that God has infused into the minds of men of spiritual quality all down the ages His own thoughts and messages, with the belief that, in *the case of the prophets*, their expression of that thought and message was uniquely and perfectly adequate *for that generation*. This statement gives ample space for the second view and for its full measure of truth. God is ever moving down the corridors of time, in the long story of man, and seeking interpreters, who in articulate forms will truly reveal His character, and justify His ways.

And it also finds room for the first view, when we maintain the rare spiritual quality of those men who were specially chosen down the ages to interpret the Divine character and working with accuracy and even with perfection in the clear language of the Holy Scripture.

Into the atmosphere and environment of each age God spoke through His servants the Prophets, choosing those verbal expressions of current speech which would with greatest precision convey His exact meaning to their understandings. Verbal inspiration had vital value in those days. Only in some such way as this can we give any vital significance to the words of Our Lord when He said, "Till heaven and earth pass, one jot (yod) or one tittle (penstroke) shall in nowise pass from the law till all be fulfilled." But we must be on our guard when we apply those phrases to other and later times, lest we fail to catch their truth. They will need interpretation in the light of thought and scholarship, as they reconstruct past ages before our eyes. We desire to suggest that this may be the true story of the interaction of the human and the Divine in the Holy Scriptures.

III

But first of all it may help us to recognize the strength and weakness of the Catholic mind and the Modernist mind in regard to this. Catholic witness seems always to lay stress on the Divine side of life, but often refuses to carry it through in all its fullness to the human side. Baptismal regeneration, to the Catholic, is just emphasis on the Divine operation in answer to faith and prayer; but he may often neglect to carry it out logically by insistence on the human side in true conversion of heart and life. His thought in Confirmation is the Divine interference at the laying-on of hands; but he may not always insist with equal emphasis on the absolute necessity of simple Christian character which alone can give reality to the Holy Spirit's gifts. His whole conception of the Church is that it is Divine, united to the Lord by indissoluble links of Apostolic Succession, making its character heavenly and its ministry of the Divine order; but he is not always careful to see that the theory is always justified by the actual facts of Church life on its human side. Let us be ready to acknowledge our lasting debt to the Catholic conception of Christianity, in that it has kept alive and aflame the Divine origins of our birth and life; even though we may not feel that the necessary implications of that truth have been as impressively emphasized in the human lives of all its members, as they might have been.

On the other hand, the Modernist movement seems to begin at the human end, but often fails to reach up to the divine. Bishop Gore's indictment of modern criticism justifies the old contention that emphasis on the human Christ does not lead to the doctrine of the Lord of Glory. Some Modernists stop short in their argument, and refuse to follow reason into the realms of faith. They fight

shy of the realms of the supernatural, and this is the preconception which makes most of their human learning so vain.

If this be true of these schools of thought, there is all the more need, when many minds are obscured and confused, for Evangelicals to keep a clear and simple path. At all costs we must preserve both elements in their true relation, and see that neither of them is lost. Evangelicals have to maintain strenuously the objectivity of Divine Revelation, as the utterance of God Himself, and to bear clear witness to the fact that His message to mankind suffers no distortion by the admission of a human and infallible element *throughout*. On the other hand, we have to permit full play to the reality of the human element, lest we refuse new light, and, worse still, lest the human side of God, which is Christ, be overlaid and lost.

IV

Can we then present our case which will point the true relation and interaction of God and man in the inspiration of the Holy Book ?

First, can we really uphold Amos when he says, " Thus saith the Lord," and claim that this is the very voice of God at the lips of Amos in the language of his time ?

Let us put it thus. We begin with God. He wants to speak to a generation, and He chooses His instrument, a man of the time. Language is part of the atmosphere into which God speaks with a human voice, and He must use it *as it stands* to convey His will. Every phrase in the language has its own value in expressing exactly or otherwise that Will. One phrase will let the light clearly through without distortion, another will slightly misrepresent the truth, another will be opaque, and let no light through at all.

Can we then agree in saying that God the Holy Spirit moved holy men to speak that exact phrase which *to that generation* let most light through ? If so, then the message, and its vehicle in words, were true, perfectly true, as far as human expression could be, for that time.

This will present serious difficulty to many minds. For instance, they will recall expressions of violence in the mouths of Psalmist and Prophet, and even Apostle, which seem far from the Spirit of Our Lord as we have learnt to know it. But it is significant that strange parallels can be found on the lips of the Perfect Man, as reported in the Gospels (e.g., Matt. xxiii. 32, 33). Is it not at least possible that such directness of speech may be according to the truth of things as they really are *sub specie æternitatis* ? Then too, there are probably elements which belong to floating tradition and to old ethnic religion, but are we committed to belief in them because they were used to illustrate or convey the truth to that generation ? We still speak of the sun rising without renouncing Copernican astronomy. The use by St. Paul of the story of Hagar may not be readily intelligible to us, because our minds move in other categories of thought, but it was illustrative and perhaps conclusive to minds of that time, and was chosen for that purpose.

This position secures the reality of the objective Revelation of God as clearly distinct from the subjective religious conceptions of men. Here is the crux, and we ought to face it. Is the movement in the speech of these holy men from the Holy Ghost? "*Thus saith the Lord.*"

And secondly, there is the other side. Times change. Words lose and change their significance in one generation, how much more down the ages? We have to reconstruct the past, its language, its thought, and the whole environment of the age. Otherwise our interpretation of the old oracles in modern times may be hopelessly at fault. For our own sakes we must study the past, and use all the modern light that scholarship and thought has thrown on life. Only in this way can the full message of our Father to his modern children through His ancient prophets be clearly known.

We can illustrate in a simple way the danger of reading modern conceptions into ancient truth. No aspect of God was more familiar to Our Lord than "the Father." It was the warp and woof of His teaching. But He was thinking, and so were His hearers, of oriental fatherhood. The grave and reverent senior was an object of awe and reverence to the whole family. His lightest will was law, but there was a gracious familiarity no doubt which expressed the love of the father's heart.

The Fatherhood of God has amazingly gripped our age, but in a different sense from that intended by Our Lord. We have now, generally speaking, a view of Almighty God as an indulgent Father, rather careless about righteousness, if He can magnify His love. It may be true to say that an average modern father presents no adequate parallel to the reality of the Father God; and it is certainly arguable that the Lord might have treated otherwise the doctrine of the Fatherhood of God to enforce the truth about God had He lived in modern days. Surely then we must reconstruct the past, if we are to arrive at the truth. This is only by way of illustration. The point is that we have all only one aim in view, that is to find out the true message of God to *our* generation as we study His Word; and if we are to succeed, there are two principles which we must preserve intact.

(i) We have to recognize that the utterance of God was as clear and distinct to that generation as words could make it, that verbal inspiration in that day was a reality, that the Holy Spirit did move holy men to speak what, and as, they did, under the conditions of the time.

(ii) It is our peremptory duty through study to reconstruct that age under the guidance of the promised Spirit, if we would reach the truth for ourselves. We need to recognize that *as it stands* it may not convey the final truth to modern ears, that there is more light yet to break from the Word of God from such study, and that there is need of constant reinterpretation in the highest service of truth as it is in Jesus.

These principles seem to give space for the final truth that the Bible is the Word of God, which must still stand as the main

mooring for our troubled days. It is impossible, we submit, for Evangelicals to admit categorically any principle involving a human and fallible element which has to be reckoned with at every point of our doctrine and worship. Confirmation candidates, thus instructed, find the ground rocking under their feet, and soon lose sense of the certainties of faith. In saying this we are not confusing the heavenly treasure with the earthen vessel which has preserved it for us; we are only complaining of a theory which assumes throughout that the earthen vessel has disfigured and spoiled the treasure. The word of St. Thomas à Kempis is as necessary as it is heartening for our day and generation: "He to whom the Eternal Word speaketh is set free from a multitude of opinions." But alongside of this comes the direct challenge to reconstruct the past of Bible history with thought and devotion, so that we may find for ourselves the exact truth that will still be our comfort and stay in this late day.

V

Let us here deal with a difficulty which will suggest itself to some minds at this point. Let us imagine a perfect reconstruction of some age in atmosphere, environment and language, and let us assume, according to our theory, that we have the authentic voice of God speaking some exact message through His prophet of that time. Here is then, *ex hypothesi*, a perfect revelation of the character of God as He desires it known. Years pass, and another age and another voice are equally clear and final in their revelation of an unchanging God. But when we compare these revelations, we notice a new accent or some new feature, or even some apparent contradiction which is vaguely disquieting; and at first sight we feel the night is settling down on us again as impenetrable as ever.

Still, there is no real need to despair either of our faith or of our principles. The new feature is showing a new fact of the character of God which earlier Revelation did not give. The differing accent is reflecting the special needs of the age to which He is speaking either in judgment or in mercy. The apparent contradiction may be due to the limitations of those to whom He spoke and their incapacity to bear a fuller revelation. The principle of progressive revelation is amply justified both by our common sense and in the Bible itself. A simple illustration of this will make this clear. "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" was a marked moral advance on the savagery of old days, when two eyes and several teeth were regarded as the natural and legitimate satisfaction for the wrong. But Our Lord did not deny the reality and moral value of the old command when He moved on to a new revelation of the character of God and said, "Resist not evil." Both were true expressions in their time and place of the will of God. The apparent contradiction finds an equally simple explanation to our common sense in the progressive education of free and fallen man, whose faculties were so impaired that they could not bear the undimmed

light. Revelation is only the divine side of education on its moral and spiritual side; and education is always progressive as man is able to apprehend the wider truth.

We are well aware that this does not cover the whole ground. There is a growing modern conviction that the testimony of "the free conscience of the Christian man" is the *sole* final arbiter of what is really the authentic voice of the Spirit speaking through the lips of men of old time. This is profoundly true, but needs serious qualification. It seems to solve quite easily the main difficulty, but it raises three more. (i) The convictions of the individual 'Christian man' must be corrected by the witness of the whole Church, or we are landed in sectarian individualism. (ii) His 'conscience' must be educated as well as satisfied. The moral judgment needs as much training as the mind, and how else or better than by the conception of progressive revelation of truth in the Bible down the ages *not* distorted by men. (iii) As for the word 'free,' it must not always be assumed that freedom is truth. We are only *free* to think God's will. Christ had man's freewill, yet, "the Son can do nothing of Himself but what He seeth the Father doing." The Church, the Bible, and the Holy Spirit are all necessary for the true exercise of the "free conscience of the Christian man."

Our theory has within it perhaps the seeds of reconciliation between ancient truth and modern light if we keep carefully to the ground chosen by God Himself in His Word. The Bible has no purpose or desire to teach truth other than that which deals with its own concern, the Fellowship between God in heaven and His dear sons on earth. We shall not expect to find there scientific or biological exactness; all such reference was given in the language and thought of its own day as men were able to bear it.

Scientific accuracy in ancient days would only have added confusion and darkness. To give an illustration: "Thou hast made the round world so fast that it cannot be moved" simply could not have read for 2,000 years, "Thou hast made the round world move so fast that it cannot stand still." The second statement is the truth, the first is not; and we must admit it without dismay. Bishop Gore argues cogently that Darwin would have given no shock whatever to the Church of the fourth century. It was not necessarily lack of faith in God and His Word that led St. Augustine to regard the picture of earth in the first chapters of Genesis as allegory and not history. In the same way it surely may be held that the picture of Heaven as described in the last chapters of the Revelation is imagery, and not literally true in precious stones.

VI

It is possible to maintain that this was Our Lord's attitude to the Bible. The word "It is written" seems to have had oracular authority with Him. Surely He asserted the principle that the Divine Voice was heard distinctly at the lips of men. This needs

no illustration. It stands firm in detail, and in grand outline all through His teaching. The old Word of God was never to be lost or overlaid. He came not to destroy but to fulfil.

But a new fulfilment was at hand. The old Will of God was to be given deeper meaning and wider scope in His new day. For instance, the old commandments as to the Sabbath, which were the exact Will of God for the childhood of the race, were to be revised in the new light he brought. He would even break the actual commandment in order to let loose its spirit, and so fulfil it, i.e., fill it full of new meaning and power.

The two principles which we are maintaining seem therefore to find ample justification in the teaching and practice of Our Lord. And He bids us specially rely on the Holy Spirit to guide us into all truth, new and old. We watch the Holy Spirit at the very first, in the Acts and in the Epistles, unfolding and interpreting the meaning of Christ's mission. And as we are loyal to Him, we may expect the same guidance to-day.

If, then, this is our conviction, we shall maintain the accuracy and inspiration of God's Word as perfectly adequate for its time, and the truest possible revelation of the Father's Will to the people of that day.

This might come to be regarded as the first charge on the Evangelical tradition. God has not given a revelation of Himself which is not legible or intelligible to ordinary men, as some higher criticism endeavours to prove. If that were so, we say it reverently, it would not be our fault if none of His children in the distant land of earth find their way home to their Father.

But, on the other hand, that Revelation once given to the saints by Christ Himself is not merely a static deposit of the past, but vastly dynamic as the years unroll. We have to cling closely to what Canon Oliver Quick, in his *Testing of Church Principles*, calls 'the Evangelical facts.' These concern our very life. But the interpretation of these facts will find new expression from age to age. We must abide by the responsible guidance of the Holy Ghost to the Church of every age. These have been sad days when the new Evangelical and the older form take opposite sides, one saying, "I am led by the Holy Spirit," and the other, "I am led by Christ," even though both think that they are consciously and absolutely loyal to the truth they see. That way lies dishonour and death to the cause, and sorrow to the Lord. Certainly there can be no distinctions in the Holy Trinity responsible for the divisions of men. Here is the call for devotion and sense, and love among ourselves, in fulfilling our Lord's own Prayer, "That they may be one, even as We are One."

The fact remains that multitudes of Evangelicals, quite familiar with problems of thought, find no difficulty whatever in reconciling in their own soul-life the apparently conflicting truths. They do it in some such way as is suggested here. They read the Bible as the oracle of God, and find they have everything to gain from close study of the Word in the exact setting of the past. The tragedy

of our time is that Evangelicals cannot make their contribution to the welfare of the nation, because they are broken and discredited through controversy as to the meaning and interpretation of the Bible. Other societies of Evangelical tradition besides the C.M.S. are becoming the victims of disruptive thought. Can any effort be too great to secure some comprehensive view of things which may lead us into peace, and then on to power? Cleverly devised formulæ will not do it. Only the Spirit of God, inspiring each, can lead us moderns into full truth as it is in Jesus, through the Holy Word.

But the future lies with the truth therein revealed. Modern criticism has given us back a Bible with surprisingly few changes, and with enhanced spiritual value in many ways. Our work now is to get beyond prolegomena, down to its heart, and explore and explain its undying message to the world.

Herbert Thorndike is an obscure divine of the Caroline and Commonwealth period who would have probably remained in his obscurity were it not that he was a supporter of Laudian ideas, and advanced a number of opinions for which Anglo-Catholic apologists search with unwearied diligence in order to prove that the views of their party were held in the Church of England in the seventeenth century. They are able to find isolated instances of prayers for the dead, of the practice of private confession and similar particularities, and on these they appear to base the theory that these were the general teaching and the normal features of the life of the Church. A well-known volume on the history of the Church in the seventeenth century has made the most that is possible of the few instances which the writer has been able to gather. Canon Lacey, for whose industry and ingenuity most readers have a great respect, has been set the task of writing Thorndike's life for the S.P.C.K. series of "English Theologians" (6s. net), and he has made the best of a dull subject. He gives a careful analysis of Thorndike's writings and makes due apology for their circumlocution and tediousness as well as for the various inconsistencies which he displayed in the different circumstances in which he found himself in the course of his career as he passed from the period of Anglican ascendancy under Charles I to the time of its submergence under the Commonwealth and the return to prosperity with the Restoration. Much of Thorndike's teaching has little bearing on the problems of to-day, and he is never likely to have much influence on modern Church thought, and except for antiquarian interest his works are not likely to be consulted by any but the curious student.