

OXFORD CONFERENCE OF EVANGELICAL CHURCHMEN.

GENERAL SUBJECT: "THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST AND
PRESENT-DAY EVANGELISM."

Opening Address by the Rev. C. M. CHAVASSE, M.C., M.A.,
Master of St. Peter's Hall, Oxford.

MY DEAR BRETHREN,—

For the sixth time, in the seven years of its existence, St. Peter's Hall welcomes you to Oxford. These years, since the Cheltenham Conference became the Oxford Conference, have marked a gratifying increase in the numbers of this gathering and also a steady rise in the public estimation of its importance.

You, also, have watched, year by year, the progress of St. Peter's from its very inception; till to-day you behold it a small but complete Oxford Hall, affording a home with Evangelical traditions to ninety undergraduates; half of whom are seeking Holy Orders, and training here to recruit your ranks in the ministry of the Gospel.

Before, therefore, I attempt to introduce the subject of this year's Conference, I venture (greatly daring) to speak one urgent word about the place wherein we are gathered. A few sentences will suffice to show that necessity itself compels me to ask your indulgence for procedure that would otherwise be questionable on the part of your Chairman.

Quite bluntly, "Do you want to meet year by year in St. Peter's Hall?" For unless the whole Evangelical School of Thought will take the venture of St. Peter's seriously and make its establishment a major and pressing concern, we cannot guarantee its permanence. You will probably have heard of the desperate straits into which we were plunged by the collapse of the Martyrs Memorial Trust in the autumn of 1933. Suffice it to say that our little Hall, just struggling to a recognised and respected position in this great University, suddenly found itself responsible for liabilities which exceeded £94,000. By the grace of God those liabilities stand to-day at the less alarming figure of £60,000. But, even so, it is necessary to raise more than £2,000 a year to meet interest charges, before we can attempt to reduce the capital of the debt that hangs round our neck. For myself I am ready (if not willing) to devote the remaining years of my life to the not exhilarating slavery of attempting to raise large sums of money. We have, moreover, produced a Seven Years' Plan according to which the whole task might be achieved in that relatively short space of time. We are calling for Friends of St. Peter's Hall who by subscriptions for the next seven years will guarantee the interest charges on the Hall;

and we are especially asking Parishes to befriend us in this way. Meanwhile, once the yearly interest has been met, we shall be given time to search for Benefactors of the Hall to establish and endow it. £60,000 is not a large sum when it is spread over the whole country, and if it becomes the responsibility of the whole Evangelical School of Thought ; and I would plead with this Conference to make it so. Let me add but two facts. We are about to discuss Evangelism. During the last few years this University has witnessed an evangelistic revival more remarkable than any within living memory. But close observers of this movement of the Spirit are emphatic that it was the establishment of this Hall which, under God, made that revival effective. Again, there will be launched next month a great national movement for the celebration of the fourth centenary of the Reformation. The year chosen is 1938 ; for it was in 1538 that the English Bible was set up by authority in parish churches. And the hope is that a revival of interest in the Bible will again let loose revival floods of spiritual power. But, as the Bishop of Worcester would tell you, the initial meetings which discussed and planned the Celebration were convened in this Hall in the early months of 1932. Humanly speaking, had there been no St. Peter's Hall there would be no Reformation fourth centenary Celebrations. I repeat, therefore, the question—" Do Evangelicals want St. Peter's Hall ? " If so, here it is ! No dream ! No castle in the air ! But an accomplished fact ! But they cannot have their Hall without paying for it ; and the price is extraordinarily small compared with the value of what we possess.

With sincere but unrepentant apologies I turn to the subject of our Conference—Present-Day Evangelism.

PRESENT-DAY EVANGELISM.

When this Conference first came into being at Cheltenham under the inspiring Chairmanship of the present Bishop of Chelmsford, one of its primary objects was to forward the great cause of Reunion. We are not unmindful of Reunion as we discuss this year the subject of Present-Day Evangelism. It is an old and true saying that the Churches parted in passion, and they will only reunite in passion. That passion, which alone can heal our unhappy divisions, is the passion for souls. Evangelism is the necessary atmosphere in which the cause of Reunion can live and grow. It is this truth which has given rise to another prophecy—namely, that Reunion will come not from the centre of Christendom but from the circumference. It is the passion for evangelism in missionary lands which is already responsible for schemes of Reunion in Africa, Persia, and China, and is actually bringing into being the United Church of South India.

But more, to-day we are conscious of a missionary situation at home, and of an evangelistic movement to meet it in the Churches of our own land. This means that the signs of the times are at last set fair for Reunion in this country ; though not (as I believe) for any organised movement of united evangelism, at the moment.

There is the attractive suggestion of a united evangelistic effort in

our own Church. Already the passion for souls has produced the call for a "Truce of God." The phrase requires examination, for on several occasions it has been loosely employed. The word truce indicates a temporary cessation of hostilities between combatants. It does not signify a pact between allies. A "truce of God," therefore, has rather unfortunate implications when used to describe an understanding between different Schools of Thought in the Church. And yet the phrase *does* convey what is essential for the work of Evangelism, if it means "a truce to controversy." Controversy is sometimes necessary if truth is to be preserved. But let us be quite clear that controversy possesses no creative force. It is barren of fruits, and death to the spread of the Gospel. The whole Church would welcome a cessation of controversy that it might concentrate on its primary duty of winning souls for Christ and of shepherding them for heaven. It would, for example, be a calamity if just at this juncture the thorny subject of "Church and State" were raised to distract and divide us. The Archbishops' Committee on Evangelism would have been set up five years ago had it not been for the Prayer Book Controversy. For you will remember how the Archbishops' call for Renewal, in the summer of 1929, proved stillborn because Controversy had unfitted the Church to listen or to respond. It is reasonable, therefore, to demand from our leaders that if by authority a Committee on Evangelism is set up, that Committee should be given a chance; and the issue should not be prejudiced and foredoomed by matters of a controversial character being forced upon our consideration. It is humbling to reflect that in his book *The Reign of King George the Fifth*, a reign of startling incident, Mr. D. C. Somervell can only record the Prayer Book Controversy as the Church's contribution to the events of the past twenty-five years; and that he traces back its history as far as the Royal Commission of 1906. A truce of God is a *sine qua non* of effective evangelism. But such a truce for purposes of evangelism would defeat its own object if it were construed as an alliance of all Schools of Thought in the Church for combined evangelistic effort. When my father, the late Bishop of Liverpool, was instituted as a young man to this very Church of St. Peter-le-Bailey, Oxford, in which we are met, Bishop Mackarness (who must have known something of his opinions as Vicar of St. Paul's, Holloway) said to him: "Mr. Chavasse, be a man of peace." To which my father rejoined: "My Lord, I cannot work with Tractarians." But the Bishop only repeated his injunction: "Mr. Chavasse, be a man of peace." I cannot see that the two attitudes are mutually exclusive. We must be men of peace if we are to evangelise; but this does not necessarily mean that Anglo-Catholics and Evangelicals must work together. It is essential for effective evangelism that evangelists should be unfettered to proclaim to the full God's scheme of salvation as each of them knows it and has experienced it. A Gospel presentation that is a safe compromise, or neutral in colour, stifles the enthusiasm of the missionary and fails to arouse any answering response in the

heart of the hearer. When, for example, in the Hilary Term of 1923 the Anglican and Free Churches combined for a great "Religion and Life" campaign in the University, the chief conductor, Bishop Neville Talbot, afterwards confessed that he had felt seriously hampered in his presentation of Christianity because he could not go beyond what was acceptable to all the various Schools of Thought taking part. It may be, of course, wholly admirable to invite a saintly Anglo-Catholic to address an Evangelical congregation on certain aspects of the faith. And I know that Evangelical preachers are listened to with appreciation in Anglo-Catholic Churches. But experience has shown (and we in Oxford have had such experience) that for a maximum of effect a missionary must be allowed to speak out of the fullness of his heart without fear of giving offence, and that a congregation must listen with open and responsive minds and not with suspicion or on the defensive. To instance, perhaps, the point of chief difficulty—an Anglo-Catholic missionary is not the person to instruct an Evangelical congregation on the Ministry of Reconciliation; neither could an Evangelical missionary explain about Confession to an Anglo-Catholic congregation without disturbing and upsetting them. And yet the tremendous subject of the Forgiveness of Sins is not a matter for follow-up work. It stands at the very forefront of the Gospel; and must be one of the first matters introduced by the Evangelist, even as it was by Christ Himself. It is well that we should be clear on this question of the impracticability of united evangelistic effort, in order to avoid subsequent misunderstanding and heart-burning. And I am certain that my Anglo-Catholic friends would agree with every word I have said.

But the matter concerns us even more vitally who call ourselves Evangelicals. As the word Evangelical denotes, we claim to be experts in evangelism; and certainly all Schools of Thought in the Church are looking towards us for a lead at this present time of opportunity. It would be a betrayal if by compromise, however well-meaning; or by watering down our message; we thereby became incapable of giving our peculiar contribution to the Church as a whole. "Salt is good, but if the salt has lost its savour wherewith shall it be salted?" Evangelicals must not become good for nothing. On the other hand, if "like a mighty army moves the Church of God," that army is more, not less, effective because it is composed of *Divisions* (mark the word!) working separately and yet in harmony one with the other. One united army would be a rabble. But an army composed of divisions, co-ordinated and yet distinct, will move forward towards one objective, but with each of its units free to exercise the maximum of self-expression, and therefore of effect. A hundred years separated the Evangelical Revival and the Tractarian Movement, and they have both learnt much from the other. But we shall see neither revival nor movement, but only stagnation if the twentieth century seeks to fuse them into one.

Then can Evangelicals unite in evangelism with the Free Churches?

Certainly they possess close affinities with "the sister Churches of the Reformation." And yet, in my judgment, at the present juncture, combined evangelism with the Free Churches would be a mistake.

In Present-Day Evangelism we are faced with a new situation, and one which has had no parallel in our land for the past two centuries. We have to deal with a generation that is wholly lacking in a Christian background. The Bible is an unread and unknown book to masses of our countrymen, who are, thereby, totally ignorant of the simplest facts of the Gospel. The position is partly explained, and certainly rendered more difficult, by the prevalent opinion that scholarship has disclosed the Bible as unreliable; and also by a general impression, cultivated in several quarters, that it does not matter what a man believes so long as he possesses some kind of mystical experience of God. Under such circumstances, if a Mission is to be more than a subjective stimulus; if it is to proclaim an objective message possessing a definite scheme of salvation from sin, of communion with God, and of service for our fellows; then teaching becomes as important a factor in evangelism as conversion. There is the Bible as God's Word not only to be taught and explained, but its study encouraged. There is prayer and public worship and Holy Communion to be built up into the lives of babes in Christ, as the great means of grace. There is the whole conception of the Church and its fellowship to become for multitudes a new and living force. In a word there is almost as much to be done in the following up of a mission as among catechumens in missionary lands, if those whom we seek to evangelise are not to slip away but to grow into reliable and serviceable Christians.

For this reason the channel of evangelism to the masses must be through the Parish Churches. Such interdenominational missions as those of Dr. Moody in the seventies will not meet the situation. "Other times, other methods." Pre-war missions set souls ablaze by applying the spark to fires already laid. To-day we have to supply the fuel as well as to kindle it. And this can only be effected through the Parish Church system. Every Parish Church, as also every Free Church Chapel, possesses already an efficient machinery and organisation for teaching, for shepherding, and for building up Christian character. If only, therefore, individual Churches can be galvanised into life, then (and only then) we have placed in the hand of God an effective instrument, adequate to accomplish His purposes of love for this generation. What is required, then, is evangelism through the Parish Church; and our objective must be to help all Parish Churches to become flowing channels of grace to their flocks, who are hungry, strayed, and lost.

Nevertheless, though the living water of revival may at the present move not as one tidal wave, but through a network of separate but co-ordinated irrigation canals; yet it is through such common evangelism that unity will come both within our own Church and also between the Anglican and the Free Churches. Already a new distinction is beginning to characterise the individual Churches of our

land. People in doubt and despair, and longing for help and definite teaching, are not asking so much whether a Church is high, low, or broad; but is it alive, and does it proclaim a living message? Let it be frankly admitted, with shame and repentance, that to style a Church as Evangelical does not necessarily mean that it possesses or preaches a Gospel. It may be as dead as Pharisaism, and not even as sound. There is also, I am concerned to believe, more rationalism to be found to-day in the Free Churches than in the Church of England; and John Wesley would feel himself out of place in numerous assemblies even in the great Methodist Communion. There is, therefore, instead of old divisions, an increasing drawing together of like-minded bodies of believers both within and without the Church of England. And in what does this like-mindedness consist? Simply in a practising belief on the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Christian Religion is the only religion in the world in which God comes to man with a gift, instead of man approaching God with gifts. From first to last Christianity is a religion of grace, where God does everything and man can do nothing of himself. Hence Christianity is an Evangel, a Gospel, the Good-news of what God has done, is doing, and will do for us, in proportion as we believe, and so allow Him to do it. But we have very largely forgotten this dynamic element of our Faith; and have presented it rather as an ethic, an example of life, and as a principle of social or international progress. Hence, so often, the supernatural has evaporated from our ministry; and we have ceased to believe in miracles in our dealing with souls for whom Christ died. Yet all the time men and women are longing for peace and assurance, for power to live better lives, and for reality in their comprehension of God and the Unseen. It is astonishing, these days, how everyone, even those whom we might least suspect, seems to be ready and eager to speak about the deepest matters of their souls. It is even more astonishing (because our faith is so weak) to witness the results, where the Gospel is definitely proclaimed whether to individuals or congregations.

"The fields are white unto harvest. But the labourers (with the sickle of God's Evangel) are few. Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest that He will thrust forth labourers into His harvest." And may you and I be part of the answer to that prayer which Christ our Saviour still offers up at the throne of God.

The Student Christian Movement has issued in the "Religious and Life Books" series reprints of *The Kingdom without Frontiers*, by Hugh Martin (1s. net) and *Two Days Before*, by Canon H. R. L. Sheppard (1s. net). The former is an examination of "The Witness of the Bible to the Missionary Purpose of God" and the latter contains "Simple Thoughts about our Lord on the Cross." Another reprint in the same series is Leyton Richards' *The Christian's Alternative to War*, an Examination of Christian Pacifism.