

GOD—AND OURSELVES.

BY **PREB. H. W. HINDE, M.A.**, Principal of Oak Hill College,
Prebendary of St. Paul's Cathedral.

THE Oxford Conference of Evangelical Churchmen 1935 has brought us again face to face with Eternal Truths, and has set them in the environment of the Present Day. We have been reminded of the primary duty and task of the Church to proclaim the Gospel, the content of which is so stupendously great; and we have considered how, in some measure, we may do it in our own home land. Now with the glory and greatness of the task before us, and aspiring to greater faithfulness and zeal in the performance of it, in response to what we believe to be a Divine Challenge, we would present ourselves before God and hear what He hath to say to us. It would at any time be presumption to speak in the Name of the Lord had not the speaker first sought, prayerfully and humbly, a message from the Lord. I ask you now to believe that the present speaker has done that, and believes that, unworthy though he knows himself to be of the occasion, and still more of his Lord, he has received a message he is to pass on.

There has come home to us afresh here what has been so repeatedly dinned into our ears, the clamant cry of a needy world for the Gospel message. We cannot pretend not to know of the opportunity of the day, nor of the greatness of the day because of its opportunity.

When God set the Promised Land before Israel and called upon them to enter in and to drive out all that opposed or exalted itself against God, He gave Joshua the grand promise: "There shall not any man be able to stand before thee all the days of thy life: as I was with Moses, so I will be with thee: I will not fail thee, nor forsake thee" (Joshua i. 5). Joshua and the people went forth in humble reliance on the promise of God. Joshua, like Moses before him, was conspicuously a man of prayer. How much there must have been at that time to occupy his thoughts and take up his time. How many things must have needed attention and how many people must have wanted to see him. But in spite of all he found time for prayer (as well as, we may be sure, for meditation in the book of the Law). Up the hill, out on the plain, down in the valley, Joshua surveyed the situation immediately before him, sought direction and yielded himself to obey. What an example and inspiration he must have been to those who served under him and to all the people. We need that spirit of prayer which possessed Joshua. May God give it to us more and more, for it is only in that spirit that we shall be able to overthrow the forces of evil, and rightly establish the Kingdom of our Lord. But it is not to the example of Joshua I ask you now to turn. Isaiah prophesied at a time of great spiritual decline, albeit at a time of much religious observance. He thinks of Jehovah as a great universal King Who requires truth in the inward parts. It grieves

him that the worship that is offered is so perfunctory and unreal. He perceives that in fact the heart of man through pride rebels against God while it offers him certain lip service. To him, or if you like to Deutero Isaiah, it falls to declare how Jehovah the King sends His Servant through Whom there rings out a message of hope to a deceived but needy world. That Isaiah might be the great force that he became, he was called to submit to purging and sanctification that, truly consecrated, he might receive instruction and direction, and be the Lord's messenger. Again, in these days of spiritual decline, we need that spirit which led Isaiah to put himself in the position to see the Lord sitting upon a Throne, high and lifted up, and to submit ourselves to Him that through the purging influence of the Spirit of God we may with true heart and pure lips tell out the truth of God. Are we ready for that? Dare we contemplate such a vision as that Isaiah had? It means such an absolute surrender to God that obliges us to cast aside every preconception or practice which is seen to be inconsistent with the mind or will of God. No one can say what it will mean to himself, or to anyone, until in the providence of God he experiences the revelation of God to his soul. But it must mean a readiness then to obey. It may hurt our pride; it may change our life; it may mean much or little; are we ready for it? Do we in heart ask for it? Whatever the previous experience may be, with most of us at any rate, there is still room for some new manifestation of the power and purity and of the purposes and intent of God.

But it is not to Isaiah, to his vision or his teaching, that I would now chiefly turn your mind.

If Isaiah, at any rate in the later writings, sees things from an Evangelical point of view, Jeremiah's standpoint is ethical. He is always severely practical. What God has said, he conceives, God means and no less. What God demands, God expects and no less. Where there is profession of religion there must also be religious performance, and whereas God reads the heart and would rule the spirit, the performance must be no mere external ritualism but that which springs from the heart. To such a man any compromise with Truth or Duty is unthinkable. With him there must be no temporising expedients.

The nation in his day is secretly convinced of the wisdom of turning to God. It realises that God has to be reckoned with, and that it needs God for what can only be found in God and come from Him. But it is only half-hearted. There is no real earnestness of purpose. It wants to hold on to its sins and at the same time to serve God that it may receive from Him. And, if it cannot frankly do that, it wants to give God such service as is as little unpalatable to its degenerate taste as possible. Those ministers of religion who provide a soporific are to be preferred. If the soporific itself demands something on the part of the individual so that he acquires a smug sense of self-righteousness with which to soothe his conscience, so much the better.

"The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests bear rule by

their means ; and my people love to have it so " (Jer. v. 31). But what is the good of it ? " What will ye do in the end thereof ? "

Jeremiah is not deceived by the rumour that there is a wide-spread feeling after God. It is a sign, and an encouraging one, but little more. Rightly served, no doubt, it will become more intense and find relief in God, but if mollified with ointment the amelioration will be only temporary and the disease will become less curable. It is then of the first importance that the right remedy should be prescribed. Faithfully and fearlessly therefore he declares that what the priests are proclaiming is not the Word of God and does not accord with His Will or His Ways.

" Thus saith the Lord, Stand ye in the ways and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls " (Jer. vi. 16).

Stand ye in the ways and see.

We have been doing that these two days and indeed often do it. But how much do we see ? And are we taking in what we see ? We see, as we have said, a hungry and thirsty world, feeling out after God. Evidence accumulates that in all quarters there is this longing after God. It shows itself in countless ways and is often *given deliberate* and frank expression. Perhaps there has never been an age in which good works more abounded than this. Kindness, sympathy, hearty good fellowship is seen on all sides. In spite of the financial stringency there is much very real generosity. Every deserving cause which appeals to the public meets with a notable response. Perhaps we are so accustomed to this that we hardly recognise the readiness to help which is so general. The B.B.C. appeals and the much-to-be-deplored Flag Days witness to this. And not only is this spirit seen in giving money, but at no time could one count more surely on a helping hand in time of emergency than to-day. But good works do not satisfy a hungry soul. And, generally speaking, the world is not supposing for a moment that by good works it will find God. There is no delusion on this point, but nevertheless it is a deluded world, and therein lies a large amount of our difficulty.

Let us be frank about it. Twenty years ago, during the War, there was much false teaching given, and in the Churches. In this respect we seem, generally speaking, to have lost our heads during the War. Certainly we lost a sound mind and a right judgment if we may judge by much that was written and said during those terrible days. The Word of God was forsaken that man might set forth his conception of what should be. God's plan of salvation was largely discarded in favour of man's theories. The people loved to have it so. And the preachers played up—or down—to them. Here is an ugly fact we have to face. We, generally, lacked the Jeremiah spirit and sought to get over a difficult moment by temporising expedients, and if not by actually teaching error, by acquiescing in it. The goodness and severity of God were lost sight of in a tolerance unheard of in Holy Scripture. The Death of Jesus Christ was misrepresented or so presented as suggestive

that it was not really necessary, and other ways to God than the one way through Jesus Christ were implicitly, and even explicitly, set forth.

If I do not say that from that time the blessing of God has been withheld, it is because I am conscious of the richness of the blessing which has been since upon us. But I do not hesitate to say that blessing would have been more richly abundant had we been more faithful to His Word, nor do I doubt that from that time we have lost caste with the people of our Land. The decline in Church attendance may indeed be due to other causes also, but I feel sure this is in a large degree the explanation. When the Church abandoned the sure ground of the Rock of Scripture and began to plunge about in shelving sands, she lost the confidence of those who looked to her for guidance and instruction. It may be reasonably doubted whether the Roman Church has gained as much as she claims or even whether she has gained at all in recent years. But it is certain that many have turned to her because she has never swerved from her doctrines, however erroneous in our judgment. Through all criticism and even when her doctrine has been demonstrated as unsound to the complete satisfaction of all reasonable people who believe in the Bible, she has persisted. Her obstinacy has been misunderstood by many to be the strength of conviction and they have sought peace with God in her ranks only to discover that her cocksureness has no foundation, and they have, sadder if not wiser as concerning the chief end in view, drifted away from her and are again tossed on the seas of uncertainty.

Liberty is one of the great keywords of to-day, and has been for the last fifteen to twenty years. It affects all life, and not least the Churches. Men think and say and proclaim anything which seems good in their own eyes. Years ago I was a member of a Clerical Society which met regularly all the year round. It had a limited membership but otherwise had only one rule, which was, Thorny subjects not barred. Men said with perfect frankness and without fear of offence anything they liked. Expression was given to all sorts of weird theories; oftentimes with great earnestness and obvious sincerity, but none the less oftentimes also heretically. All was said in the quiet confidence of the meeting. To repeat outside what was sometimes said inside would be to misrepresent the balance of a man's mind, and those present did not accept what was said until they had searched the Scriptures to see whether these things were so. Probably therefore the Society did no harm and may indeed have done good. But whereas then it was considered fitting to keep such suppositions and theories to the company of friends in the secret chamber that they might be discussed and the truth discovered, it seems customary now that they should be proclaimed as truth by anyone, anywhere; and oftentimes with that authority which attaches itself to the Pulpit.

Liberty has gone mad when it allows a man who has been set apart to preach the Word of God to be content with choosing (often very cleverly) a text from the Bible on which to string his

own personal ideas on some subject which interests him at the moment.

Do I exaggerate? Well, account it as exaggeration, but admit that at the back there is a measure of truth. Exaggeration is largely a matter of degree. Of recent times I have been a listener more than I have been for many years. I do not think anyone will deny that what I say at least contains too much of the truth for us to be happy about things. The world outside does not look to-day to the professing Churchman, Clerical or Lay, either for guidance to God or for direction as to the Christian life, because they do not want man's opinion, but to know What saith the Lord.

It is common in these days to hear the Victorian era held up to scorn (it seems to suggest that deterioration has set in). The Edwardian days are also regarded with some amusement if not derision. And there are not wanting those who, in spite of the great changes which have taken place during the present reign, consider that things are moving too slowly. They almost account the unknown to-morrow as being already out of date. This craze to be thoroughly modern, and to discard and even scoff at all that is old and tried, has given rein to a free criticism of the Bible and the accepted statements of Christian doctrine, so that the uneducated world no longer believes the Bible to be the Word of God and has come to regard it as, if not a discredited book, at any rate, quite unreliable. Even if, again, I exaggerate there is truth in what I say. The Bible to-day is not regarded, read or trusted as it was. It is not to others generally what it was, and I hope still is, to us. Nor does this modernistic phase affect only the Bible. Any organisation or custom savouring of a previous generation must be changed or at least renamed. It is required of all things that they adopt a new name and wear new clothes. This is not necessarily evil in itself, but what does it mean to the individual who would attach himself to some safe institution or organisation that he may find the truth? There is little remaining which by age or usage can be assumed to be trustworthy, and which has such a position that an inquirer turns naturally to it.

It is no wonder therefore that a distracted world knows not which way to turn.

If we "stand in the ways and see," this is what we see. Surely we must be prepared to do anything that the Christian Church may present a different aspect to the world.

Stand ye in the ways and see, and ask for the old paths where is the good way.

I am asking for a return to the old paths, but let me at once say in anticipation of a just criticism that I do not conceive that it is necessary to walk in the old paths precisely as did our fathers or as we did. Let us keep to the old paths even if our mode of progress differs. I do not ask the girl of to-day to walk as her great-grandmother in crinolines did a hundred years ago, but there is no reason why she should not walk along the same paths.

What are the old paths to which this text points us?

Firstly, it is the way of repentance.

Jeremiah says (vi. 15): "Were they ashamed when they had committed abomination? Nay, they were not at all ashamed, neither could they blush." There was no sense of sin or shame. If ever there was a need for a John the Baptist it would seem to be to-day. The Call to Repentance is needed by both the professedly religious and the mass who care little about religion; by the twentieth-century Pharisees and Sadducees as well as by the twentieth-century multitude. There is little sense of sin to-day, and where it is found it is often explained as morbidity or neurasthenia or is regarded as an interesting opportunity for psychoanalysis. Sin as an offence against an all-holy God with damning effect is a conception almost as dead as Queen Anne. But sin is sin, and is still the awful thing that it ever was; just as awful as when the Blessed Saviour went into Gethsemane and passed on to Golgotha. Sin separates from God, as millions could testify from the time when Adam and Eve went forth from the Garden of Eden, and as eternity will reveal. To tell a man that sin does not really matter; that it is natural and therefore there is no need to be disturbed about it, approaches spiritual murder. And to take no steps to save a man from that delusion is as culpable.

"Son of man, I have made thee a watchman unto the house of Israel; therefore hear the word at my mouth, and give them warning from me. When I say unto the wicked Thou shalt surely die; and thou givest him not warning, nor speakest to warn the wicked from his wicked way, to save his life; the same wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood will I require at thine hand" (Ezek. iii. 17, 18).

To whom does this apply? On whom does this responsibility rest? Is it only for a John the Baptist? Is it only for an ordained minister? Does it not rest, in measure, on everyone who professes to be a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ? Does God see us *showing* any concern about the salvation of the multitudes? Does He see in us any concern about it? To those of us who claim to have experimental knowledge of that glorious Gospel which we acknowledge it is the duty of the Church to proclaim to every creature a special responsibility attaches, for around us is a multitude who have never confessed their sin nor sought forgiveness through the precious Blood of Jesus Christ, and the majority of them think it does not matter.

It is customary to-day to place outside many Places of Worship some text or saying to attract the attention of the Wayfarers. These sayings reflect what those responsible think is the need of the world. Too often they seem designed to heal the hurt of the people slightly (to quote Jeremiah), saying Peace, Peace, when there is no peace. On Sunday I passed one such notice, large and very prominent, "Let not your heart be troubled." It may be the words will meet the need of some one of the Lord's people, but as far as the general populace are concerned, they need to be awakened and, indeed, troubled about their soul's need.

Professor Relton, who can hardly be described as one of our school of thought, in this week's *Church of England Newspaper* says:

"An older generation felt no cramping influences affecting its missionary zeal because it was in mind as well as in heart assured that Calvary's work had indeed secured the salvation of the world. Jesus Christ, they believed, had come to a sick world and, as the Physician of souls, had ministered effectively to the deepest needs of men. We, to-day, need to create afresh in men's minds some sense of their desperate state before we can speak to them of a Saviour and a Deliverer."

And again farther on, after referring to the call to a new life of service, he says:

"The fundamental failure of the Church lies precisely here. The demand is made by the Church from men as yet unconverted to do what only Christian converts may be expected to do."

Secondly, it is the way of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

I cannot but think that the Lord Himself had this passage, which goes on to speak of finding rest for your souls, in mind when He said, Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest (Matt. xi. 28). To the world at large, even in our so-called Christian England, Jesus Christ is no more than a figure of history. He has His place in the thought of the many as such but as no more, and with many others He has not even that place. Have we any ground for thinking that the average boy running about the countryside or playing in the streets of the large towns knows the truths of Jesus Christ? Has he, think you, any ground for believing that He, Jesus Christ, is absolutely necessary to him for his present and eternal welfare? And yet we should not hesitate to declare our belief that "no man cometh unto the Father but by" Him, and that "there is none other Name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved." To this we are called to give witness, and to this before all else pertaining to the Christian life. But can it be said that this is a mark of the believer's life as lived, generally, to-day? I feel compelled here to say something further. A "Woe is me if I do not" is upon me. Can we say that the average member of the average congregation knows the absolute necessity of Jesus Christ and of faith in Him? How seldom one seems to hear a sermon setting forth definitely (or even indefinitely) the need for regeneration. "Verily, verily I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Ye must be born again." Do these words mean nothing? Do they mean what they say? Do they contain a truth of the extremest import for all? We Evangelicals dissent from the unscriptural doctrine of Baptismal Regeneration, but are we not in effect acting as though it was true?

Jesus said to the Jews: "Verily, verily I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on Him that sent Me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation, but is passed from death unto life," and later said: "Ye will not come to Me, that ye might have life" (John v. 24, 40). To hear anyone to-day bid people Come to Jesus sounds almost Victorian.

And yet many of us heard that call and came to Jesus, and have walked with Him since. There may be no equivalent phraseology, other than those of Holy Scripture such as Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ; or if there is, let us make sure it brings home to the heart of man the same truth the other words conveyed. Language, after all, matters little so long as the truth is made known in a way understood of the people. But repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His Name among all nations. . . . And ye are witnesses of these things (Luke xxiv. 47, 48). This Conference on Evangelism must surely contain this reminder for us all, and must challenge us to bear our witness.

"The man out of whom the devils were departed besought (Jesus) that he might be with Him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, Return to thine own house, and show how great things God hath done unto thee" (Luke viii. 38, 39).

Thirdly, it is the way of obedience.

Ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and *walk therein.*

Take My yoke upon you, added the Lord Jesus after He had given the promise, And I will give you rest. Make disciples and teach them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you, was His Commission to the Church. The Gospel we proclaim is the message of a free salvation through faith in Christ alone, which is a salvation from our sins and therefore we must walk in newness of life, and by the might of His Indwelling Spirit show that sin has no dominion over us but that rather by His power the fruit of the Spirit is produced in us in place of the old works of the flesh.

It is not, however, only a matter of showing a Christ-like disposition. There is involved also the duty of well doing. The man who believes in Jesus Christ and receives Him must live Jesus Christ. If to-day the world is disposed to good works, the Christian must bestir himself for in them he must ever be foremost.

Walking in the old ways *to us* must also mean something equivalent to the former greater use of the Bible and practice of Prayer Meetings, etc.

All this and much more is covered by the call to walk therein. But there is another aspect which must be considered. We cannot walk in the old paths and at the same time tread the way of those who set forth another gospel. We must be distinct and in some sense separate while we seek to maintain the unity of the Spirit and to walk in love. Can two walk together except they be agreed? But as concerning those that love the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity and truth we forbid them not for "he that is not against us is on our part" (Mark ix. 40). We would point out to them the better way and give a reason for the hope that is in us, and if then they prefer to go their own way we are sorry but, convinced that we have the Holy Scripture—and History—behind us, we shall persevere in these "old paths where is the good way" and will "walk therein." For "Thus saith the Lord."