

# Evangelical Theology.

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IT is deeply significant that the subject of theological thinking should be discussed in successive issues of this journal; and moreover, that these discussions should be provided with the same title. For it shows that evangelical churchmen are affected by the currents in the church universal at this hour and are aware of the need for a living theology which shall not be a mere recitation of ancient phrases used as solemn incantations for keeping at bay the insidious advances of secularized thought. Perhaps also it bears witness to a subtle sense of inferiority which haunts Anglican evangelical thinking at the present time, since precisely those things which are generally supposed to be characteristic of evangelical Christianity are the things which have lost repute in the last two generations. Evangelical faith is commonly represented as individualistic, excessively Scriptural if not fundamentalist, introverted and puritanical in ethics and pietistic in outlook, whereas the tides of sentiment and thinking are running strongly in the opposite direction. A good deal of modern Christian thinking, influenced as much by the secular situation as by the study of the Bible, has been laying emphasis upon the essentially corporate nature of Christianity with the consequent importance of the church as an institution, and upon the power of reason, through philosophy and natural science, to provide an adequate intellectual basis for theology. One typical example of this approach can be seen in the recent book by Dr. Charles Raven entitled 'Good News of God.' Written under great physical and mental strain there are many things in it which are finely expressed and this is due to the fact that in a number of places Dr. Raven stands within the orbit of Evangelical faith and experience, but the theological basis of his writing is not evangelical at all as that word has been previously understood.

Here we may observe that this book illustrates, perhaps in an extreme form, the particular crisis which has overtaken evangelical theology during the last half century. The unquestioned authority ascribed to the Scriptures in earlier evangelical writing has been undermined by the pressure of scientific thought and the adoption of critical methods of Biblical Study. The message of the Bible and therefore of essential Christianity had to be elucidated by means of these new tools already applied with great success in other fields of study. The apparent reasonableness and indeed inevitability of this procedure obscured the decisive fact that the criterion of evangelical faith had been altered. Instead of a revelation given by God in history and in a Person, testified through the written accounts transmitted by the first witnesses, the assumptions of modern thought and critical methods provided the real basis of this liberal theology. The change was further obscured by the fact that most of the leaders of liberal evangelicalism had been nourished in old fashioned evangelical homes and schools, had passed through a real experience of conversion and knew that the Bible was a divinely ordained means of grace.<sup>1</sup> They claimed to be in the true

Evangelical succession and that their teaching, however different in form from that of their predecessors, preserved the substance of genuine evangelicalism set forth in a dress more suited to the needs of the twentieth century. It was not possible to deny that the pattern of their religious experience conformed to the characteristic evangelical experience, while most of their spiritual emphases were laid in the same places as those of traditional teachers, but they owed these things largely to the circumstances of their upbringing.

Nevertheless this attempt to commend Christianity to the modern secular man by presenting it in the light of modern knowledge or on the basis of assured results of criticism was in the end to present a Christianity which was not historic Christianity. The whole situation was paradoxical since the liberals laid great emphasis on history and the historical facts without which Christianity could not for one moment be Christianity. The attempt to discover the Jesus of history was bound up with a misunderstanding of the nature of historical writing, due to the uncritical acceptance of the methods of natural science by workers in the field of history. It was naively assumed that fact and interpretation were easily distinguishable in the sources which a historian was obliged to handle and that it was his duty to give an impartial, that is a factual, but uninterpreted account of what was supposed to have taken place.<sup>2</sup> When applied to the New Testament this method was supposed to enable investigators to differentiate between the facts, between what actually happened, and the doctrine of the Apostles or the interpretation which early Christians gave to the gospel facts. This attempt to get behind the Apostolic witness to Jesus, to a Jesus as He really was, only succeeded at the cost of being unhistorical, for it ignored an important element in the evidence and created a picture in harmony with the preconceived ideas of the critics. It is only possible to have a record of facts, because facts have meaning. The quest of the historical Jesus undertaken in this way to commend Him to modern thought and culture only produced an unhistorical figure. This could only have happened because in effect scientific method and modern thought were being treated by these theologians as a new source of revelation to be set alongside the revelation of the Bible in the same way that the Roman Church regards tradition as a source of revelation of equal importance with the revelation of the Bible.

It was at this point, not always clearly understood by the disputants themselves, that conservative evangelicals parted company with the liberals. They took their stand, as their forefathers had done, upon the Scriptures as the unique source of revelation. They accepted the Apostolic testimony to the significance of Jesus and could claim to be expositors of historic evangelic Christianity. But they cannot be absolved from blame for the lamentable confusion into which evangelical theology has fallen. They failed to understand that Biblical criticism was a necessity, not only from the contemporary movement of thought but also from the nature of the Biblical documents themselves. Their reaction to historical criticism and the scientific attitude was negative. They met the crying need for a living theology with the repetition of old shibboleths and outworn phrases. They failed to perceive and to teach their brethren the legitimate uses and the true limits of critical

research. In part, this profound distrust of criticism sprang from an equally profound reverence for the truth of the Gospel given by revelation of God, but if naturally, if undeservedly, involved its professors in the charge of obscurantism. They were in fact working with an intellectualised concept of revelation which identified it with the words of Scripture and the impartation of knowledge unobtainable in any other way, instead of understanding it as the free action of God in His sovereign grace.

This unresolved tension in evangelical theology in the Church of England continues until the present moment with accusations of obscurantism and countercharges of liberalism freely bandied about. Meantime the current of theological thinking has flowed steadily on, leaving some of both schools stranded high and dry further back along its course. The tocsin which was sounded by Barth amid the ruin and despair of 1918 has reverberated throughout the Christian world, and no part of the Western church has escaped its influence. Even Roman theologians who normally have ignored the work of Protestant thinkers as unworthy of their steel, have paid serious attention to the theological revival of Barth and Brunner. It is important to realise what this transformation means. It cannot be comprehended in terms of a simple dialectic which would see the liberal movement as the antithesis of traditional Christianity and the present trend as the emergence of a synthesis. Nor can the theological revival of the last twenty years be dismissed as an inevitable swing of the pendulum in the other direction largely caused by the distress and upheaval of the years between 1918 and the present time. No theology which approached its task in such a self-conscious spirit would be likely to achieve a worth while success. But the very fact that the present trend of theology is towards a reassertion, or more correctly a revival, of the theology of the Apostles and Reformers is evidence that we have begun to pass out of that period when theology fell into disrepute and emphasis was placed upon worship and Christian action. When the basis of theology is ignored, and when it seems impossible to be sure of its content, so that emphasis is placed upon the externals of Christian life, and the importance of modern thought, then in effect, the church becomes like a sign post pointing in all directions at once and theologians have lost their criterion of thought.

This revival of a concern for theology is of special importance for evangelicals since evangelicalism was born in theology and has been nourished in it ever since. The great epochs of evangelical history have also been the moments of evangelical theology. Even at its lowest levels, evangelicalism has borne witness to this fact not simply by its resistance to German liberalism but also by its resistance to the Anglo-Saxon heresy of an undogmatic Christianity. The action of Luther was a theological protest against a false theology which had obscured the faith of the gospel and the meaning of grace. He recovered for Christendom what his successors so soon lost, a true understanding of revelation as the free action of the living God in Christ and not the impartation of knowledge in the form of propositions. "The concept 'truths of revelation' in the sense of Latin propositions given and sealed once for all by divine authority in wording and meaning, is theologically impossible, if it be the case that revelation has its truth

in the free decision of God made once for all in Jesus Christ."<sup>3</sup> Barth goes on to point out in the same context that even for Calvin the practical meaning of his great work "The Institutes" was to "direct Christian thought and language to its own responsibility in the present."<sup>4</sup> Again in the eighteenth century the Evangelical Revival was a theological revival. Nothing is more significant in the work of the Wesleys than their care for theology. The hymns which played so large a part in the progress of the movement were written from faith to faith. To examine their language, their rhythm or their metaphors is to undertake a fascinating Bible study. John Wesley took immense pains to see that his lay preachers were equipped theologically for their task of spreading 'Scriptural Christianity' and compiled from his own reading, which was extensive, a work which he called 'A Christian Library.' Its range can be estimated when it is remembered that the 1819 edition was published in 30 volumes of 'extracts and abridgments of the choicest Pieces of Practical Divinity.' It was in fact a treasury of all that was best in patristic theology translated for the benefit of those engaged in evangelistic work. In like manner some of the leading evangelical fathers in the English Church during the later part of the eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century were distinguished for their scholarship and theological writing. The works of Newton and of Richard Cecil, whom the critical judgment of Bishop Samuel Wilberforce was later to designate as the one clerical genius of his party,<sup>5</sup> the Biblical commentary of Thomas Scott and the church history of Dean Milner were all solid contributions to theology which were destined to outlive in usefulness the life span of their authors. It is evident that evangelical churchmen stand in a tradition of theological learning and writing, which is now being made again a direct Christian responsibility for us by the circumstances of our time both within and without the Church.

It is the Gospel itself by which the evangelical lives and which he is bound to serve by proclaiming it in all the world, which lays this obligation of theology upon us. By this means the Church cross-questions itself about its faith and makes concrete for itself the meaning in life of the gospel of grace. The task has to be fulfilled in a two-fold manner—positively by expounding the riches of Christ so that the hungry sheep are fed, and negatively so that misinterpretations of the gospel which would limit its range and distort its meaning may be excluded. This does not mean that the task of the evangelical theologian is to produce a philosophical basis for theology to be set over against the Catholic philosophy. There is no such thing as a Reformed *philosophia perennia* and the introductory words which Barth prefixes to the first part of his Church Dogmatics serve as a salutary warning. "In practice," he writes "*philosophia christiana* has never yet taken shape; if it was *philosophia*, it was not *christiana*; if it was *christiana* it was not *philosophia*."<sup>6</sup>

Reformation theology in its origin was a protest against the power of the heathen doctor Aristotle and evangelical theology has been true to its profound insights when it has kept guard against the importing of alien speculative ideas into the doctrines of faith. The fact is that evangelical theology parts company with catholic theology a good deal further back than is commonly admitted, in the doctrine of primary

importance, of God Himself. The framework within which the evangelical works and the categories of thought he employs are those of a disciplined hearing of the Word of God in the Scriptures.

This thinking is undertaken out of a deep sense of responsibility, for the theological thinker, whether lay or clerical, is a committed member of the Church of Christ and in practice is usually an accredited teacher. Theological writing is never truly the work of a free lance but one of the functions of the whole body, which like ministering the Word and Sacraments is undertaken by a few members of the body commissioned by the Spirit in the church to do such work. For this reason, which is involved in its own essential nature, theological work is related to the whole of the church's life and especially to its proclamation and to its worship. The preacher may not be in a technical sense a theologian and the theologian may not be committed to the task of proclamation but it is quite plain that these two functions cannot really be separated but must be united at the deepest level of church life. The preacher has no right in the pulpit unless he be a theological preacher, unless he has the Word of God to proclaim, and the professor has no right in the class room unless he is serving the Church in explicating the content of faith and thereby enabling it to hear the Word of God. "I have not the faintest interest in any theology which does not help us to evangelize" James Denney once declared<sup>7</sup> indicating from another angle that theology is not a science to be pursued for its own sake but a responsible discipline of faith.

It is for the recovery of the sense of theology as a necessary function of the Church and theological thinking as a responsible discipline of faith that evangelicals must now contend. This is what we have lost in the last fifty years with the result that to members of other confessions the only audible voice from the English Church has been the Anglo-Catholic voice. How then will an Anglican evangelical seek to fulfil the theological task of the hour? The primary need is for us to know what evangelical theology in the Church of England really is, for most of our contacts with other theological traditions are rendered fruitless by our ignorance of our own position. There is already a good deal of evidence to show that a concern for sound theology and for the integrity of church teaching is widespread, but this goes hand in hand with considerable incoherence on the content of that teaching. Until this situation has been remedied, at least in a measure, it will not be possible to enter into real discussion with men of other traditions or to take the place that we ought to have in the œcumenical conversation which has already been opened in our time.

In the first place our theology will be grounded in the revelation of God given in Jesus Christ, in that final and decisive Word which has been spoken to us in an act of history. Here we take our stand with Lutherans and Calvinists, with our own Anglican reformers, with the Evangelical fathers of the eighteenth century and indeed with the constant Anglican tradition until recent times. Evangelical theology is Scriptural theology and evangelical Christianity is, in John Wesley's constant phrase, 'Scriptural Christianity.'<sup>8</sup> By its faithfulness to the Word of the Bible it stands or falls. It was on this basis that our English reformers carried through their work. The supremely important test for theology was its faithfulness in exposition of the

Scriptures and its evident congruity with their message. This was enshrined in the Articles of Religion which proclaim the sufficiency of Scripture in providing the content of saving faith and deny that anything necessary for salvation can be found anywhere else. Another article further defines the content of saving faith by saying that "Holy Scripture doth set out unto us only the Name of Jesus Christ whereby men must be saved."<sup>9</sup> This is not to assert that there is no knowledge of God to be received from extra-Biblical sources but it is to say that unless He is first known at the definite point where He has revealed Himself in Christ He will not truly be known at all. It is to assert the Scriptural knowledge of Christ made possible by the testifying work of the Holy Spirit, as the sole source both of the doctrine and of the preaching of the Church. To the English reformers as to Luther and Calvin, by force of circumstances, was committed the responsible work of theological definition and they fulfilled their task in substantially the same way as the Confessional Synod of Barmen in May, 1934, when it declared that "Jesus Christ as He is testified to us in Holy Scripture is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and death."<sup>10</sup> So our articles give to us a clear starting point for theology—the revelation of God witnessed in the Bible and this is the key to a right understanding of history and of nature.

The Articles do not attempt to prescribe the interpretation of the Bible or the relation between Old and New Testaments. No doubt it is true that for the men of the sixteenth century the Bible was unquestionably accurate in all its statements and in subsequent years revelation was regarded as knowledge about God contained in the Biblical revelation. But we do well to remember that some reformers, of whom Luther was the most important, looked upon the Bible as testimony to the Word and argued that Scripture which was undoubtedly apostolic in authorship (*e.g.*, Pauline) might nevertheless fail to be apostolic in the sense of bearing testimony to Christ. The Bible for Luther was "the cradle of Christ" and this gave him a principle of criticism of Scripture itself, in Christ. This critical understanding of the Scriptures was soon overlaid in the growth of a new scholastic orthodoxy. However we live in the post-critical epoch and it is not possible to go back to the pre-critical stage. The atomistic criticism of the past sixty years is now a part of theological history with which we have to reckon and if our predecessors erred in ascribing too much importance to its methods and results, we must learn to put it in its right place as part of the prolegomena to a Biblical divinity. The tendency of New Testament study at the moment is towards interpretation and the understanding of its central message and the unity of its witness.<sup>11</sup> All this means that we are called to grapple afresh with the "riddle of the New Testament," to expound its real message, and to let its testimony again be heard. It follows that the Bible in a new and serious way will be the starting point and criterion of all our theological thinking and also that the Church will be more firmly under the discipline of the Word than in recent times. Moreover we are reminded that creeds, confessions, church authority and doctrine itself have only a relative authority and can be tested by an appeal to the Word of God.<sup>12</sup> Important as this work of theology is, it can never have the

authority that the Thomist theology possesses in the Roman Church because it is continually open to the critical judgment of the Word testified in the Scriptures. There is appeal from doctrine or creed or church decision to the Word of Scripture and this is not the written word only but the Word which we hear by the power of the Spirit when we listen and obey.

In the second place our theology will be a reassertion of Reformation theology. It is a mere truism to say that the Church whether Roman or Reformed has been profoundly affected by the events and theology of the sixteenth century, but for us it is significant as the re-assertion as apostolic Christianity, the rediscovery of the meaning of grace and "the historical locus where the Christian conscience became most fully aware of the persistence of sin in the life of the redeemed."<sup>13</sup> It was a time when men grappled with the problem of God's speech with men and saw deeply into the meaning of His self revelation. We shall then learn to give heed to the writings of the English reformers as those to whom, all unconsciously perhaps, we owe a great debt. Already through the impact of Barth and Brunner we have begun again to listen to Luther and Calvin. But these are still for most of us strange voices and if we are to begin this vital task of the definition of evangelical faith we have first to hear in our own tongue those who have a right to speak. The recent biography of Darwell Stone points out that he would have nothing to do with the "widespread agreement that those particularist elements in the Anglican tradition which distinguished the Church of England from the rest of Catholic Christendom, so far from being a limitation were to be valued as the expression of a distinctive mission and vocation."<sup>14</sup> One is sometimes tempted to feel that there has been a similar repudiation of all that is distinctively evangelical in much that passes for evangelicalism to-day. There have been borrowings from many sources, theological and secular, but the writings of the evangelical fathers have lain undisturbed upon the shelves as the dust has accumulated over them. Forty or fifty years ago writers like Dr. Moule or Dr. Drury were familiar with the teaching of Jewell and Hooker, of Cranmer and Latimer and brought this sixteenth century witness to bear in the discussions of their own time.

To turn afresh to the English reformers is not mere antiquarianism nor a refined form of ancestor worship, but a task laid upon Anglican evangelicalism, second only in importance to the study of the Scriptures. They will teach us what it means to listen to the witness of the Bible to faith. "It is because the Fathers of the Evangelical Succession continually resorted to Holy Scripture as at once the ultimate source and the one criterion of all religious truth that we reverently hail them as the restorers and witnesses of the faith in their own and succeeding generations."<sup>15</sup> The reformers themselves gave an important place to patristic study but the results were not used in such a way that tradition took the place of the Word of God. In so far as the fathers bore witness to that Word and illuminated the meaning of Christian faith, the results of their work could be used in later centuries. Our attitude to the Fathers of the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries should be governed by the same considerations. Only then shall we begin to learn what evangelicalism truly is and until we have done that we can neither discuss its validity nor engage in theological conversa-

tion with men from other traditions. But, on the basis of the Scriptures and these Fathers, we *may* learn, albeit in fear and trembling, what we ought to be saying now.

To honour the memory of older theologians and to learn from their work should not blind us to their faults or to their limitations. We can never allow ourselves to imagine that the reformers have done our work for us and that all we need to do is to discover and set forth their answers to their problems. Reformation is not something which is achieved once and for all. Perhaps our habit of speaking of 'The Reformation' is misleading since it is apt to make us suppose that a position has been gained and that all we have to do is to defend it. The truth is that in each generation the work of theology has to be done afresh. Reflection on the meaning of the Gospel of the grace of God must be a constant activity of the Church. Like the Reformers we have to learn to listen to the voice of the Spirit leading us, in a situation very different from theirs. This gives us the third factor in the theological task of evangelicals to-day, which is to expound the relevance of evangelical faith to the present situation. We can only claim to stand in true succession to the Fathers if we adopt their fundamental principles and apply them to the urgent needs of the present time. It is only possible here to indicate certain places where the contemporary situation requires a fuller and more developed theology of the Word than was given in the sixteenth century.

The œcumenical movement, the pressure of war and recent New Testament study have combined to make necessary a restatement of the evangelical doctrine of the Church in such a way that the false antithesis of Church and Gospel which has done so much harm in modern evangelicalism, will be rendered impossible, while the Reformation protest against the false Catholic understanding of the Church will be maintained. The social chaos of our time can only be met and overcome by a theology which is much more comprehensive in its treatment of social and economic issues than classical evangelicalism, which came to birth in a state of society very different from ours. This will also raise the question of the relation of faith to culture where it is plain that the work of definition is urgently needed. Here again modern evangelical failure to discharge its responsibilities for faith has been demonstrated not merely by the absence of a theology expounding evangelical insights in these fields but also by the fact that it has been left to men of another tradition to tackle the question of law and grace with materials drawn in no small measure from evangelical sources.<sup>16</sup>

Here then are three specific ways in which evangelicals should now be discharging the responsibilities which are theirs. Their concern for the world is genuine and profound and finds expression in the unremitting work of evangelisation. But this concern for the world, if it is to bear fruit, must drive us to a concern for theological renewal. This is the greatest need of evangelicalism in the Church of England to-day and its immediate responsibility.

<sup>1</sup> See for instance 'Vernon Faithfull Storr' (1943) by G. H. Harris and 'Theodore, Bishop of Winchester' (1933) by E. S. Woods and F. B. Macnutt.

<sup>2</sup> 'History and the Gospel', C. H. Dodd, pp. 24-30.

<sup>3</sup> 'Doctrine of the Word of God' (E.T.), K. Barth, p. 16.



- 4 *ibid.*, p. 17.
- 5 'The Later Evangelical Fathers': M. Seeley, p. 93.
- 6 'Doctrine of the Word of God', p. 5.
- 7 'Why Did Jesus Die?': J. G. Riddell, p. 19.
- 8 See the preface dated October 20th, 1779, by John Wesley to "A Collection of Hymns for Use of the People called Methodists."
- 9 Article XVIII compare Article VI.
- 10 'The Significance of the Barmen Declaration for the Ecumenical Church' Theology Occasional Paper, No. 5, p. 18.
- 11 See for instance, C. H. Dodd's inaugural lecture at Cambridge in 1936 on the Interpretation of the New Testament and "The Unity of the New Testament" by A. M. Hunter.
- 12 Articles VIII, XX, XXI, XXXIV.
- 13 'Human Destiny' (Gifford Lectures) Reinhold Niebuhr, Vol. II, p 191.
- 14 'Darwell Stone—Churchman and Counsellor': F. L. Cross, p. 61.
- 15 'Essays in Ecclesiastical Biography': Sir James Stephen—Vol. II (Silver Library edition) p.131.
- 16 'Christ's Strange Work': A. R. Vidler (1944).