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Evangelical Theology — an Experiment

BY THE REV. G. H. G. HEWITT, M.A.

FROM time to time in the history of the Church the Holy Spirit lays hold of a group of men and says to them: "Go and do that. Do it now". Sometimes what they are told to do is very costly—the history of our great missionary societies is made glorious by obedient response to orders of that kind. Sometimes it is a small, reasonable, almost natural thing—a seedling waiting to be planted in a friendly soil; a decision required which follows almost imperceptibly upon other decisions already taken; a prayer at the point of action gathering up other prayers. The Evangelical Fellowship for Theological Literature, now eight years old, conforms to this second pattern. A brief account of what it has done and failed to do in those eight years may not be unwelcome to the readers of this journal, for the relationship between THE CHURCHMAN and the Fellowship has been intimate, both in giving and receiving. And if precedent for such an article were needed, it can be readily found in Mr. F. F. Bruce's article on the Tyndale Fellowship for Biblical Research in *The Evangelical Quarterly*, January 1947. Mr. Bruce describes how "in May 1938 some senior members and friends of the Inter-Varsity Fellowship met . . . to consider how best the reproach of obscurantism and anti-intellectual prejudice might be removed from Evangelical Christianity in England." The Tyndale Fellowship has specialised in Biblical studies; and in the annual Tyndale Lectures and in Tyndale House Cambridge, with its fine library, it has provided two valuable aids to worthy Evangelical scholarship.

I

The E.F.T.L. has pursued similar aims, but its methods and development have been sufficiently different for at least a few younger Evangelicals to profit by membership of both bodies. Perhaps the most significant difference is that whereas the Tyndale Fellowship is interdenominational, the E.F.T.L. stands definitely within the Anglican communion and has been much concerned with the development of Anglican theology. A brochure describes how the Fellowship was founded as a result of a joint meeting of the Oxford and Cambridge Pastorates. "Their common concern was the dearth of theological writing inspired by Evangelical insights, and the consequent failure of Evangelicalism to make its proper contribution to the Church of England as one of the schools of thought within the Church." The comparison between the two fellowships could be developed in more detail, but it may be more profitable to concentrate on the E.F.T.L., thus providing a companion-piece to Mr. Bruce's article already mentioned.

Its starting-point was the joint session of the Pastorates at Wycliffe Lodge in December, 1941. Many of those present, or members of the Pastorate Councils of that time, were soon to be called away from the

ancient seats of learning—Max Warren to the General Secretaryship of C.M.S. ; J. R. S. Taylor to the Bishopric of Sodor and Man ; D. E. W. Harrison and S. L. Greenslade to residentiary canonries at Sheffield and Durham ; it was to them, and to those who remained, that the vision came. Part of it has not yet been fulfilled—a permanent Pastorate House to be established at Oxford or Cambridge. Part found fulfilment in the “ Researchers’ Group ” which was to become the E.F.T.L. A letter dated February 6th, 1942, and signed by J. P. Thornton-Duesbery, D. E. W. Harrison and M. A. C. Warren was sent out to three dozen or so people, most of whom had been at Wycliffe or Ridley and who were in the early years of their ministry, inviting them to a preliminary conference in the following April. One paragraph from the letter may be quoted :

“ We are thinking of long-term planning and we have something in mind much wider than the production of a series of pamphlets or a book of Evangelical Essays, though these may at some time be part of the result. What we envisage is rather that the members of such a group should be working each along his particular line, with the full knowledge of the others, in such a way that the whole field of Theological Scholarship should be really covered by adequately equipped Evangelicals ; that this should produce a steady stream of books of solid, permanent value during the next five, ten, twenty or thirty years, and also that, in the meanwhile, editors and other leaders of Evangelical thought might know where to find a specialist to produce the article or memorandum required for any particular occasion.”

It was an ambitious project, almost presumptuous. Not so many months before, Hitler had prepared plans to take the whole of this age-group of Englishmen for slave-labour on the Continent, and the tide of war had hardly yet turned—presumptuous to plan books to be written in twenty or thirty years’ time ! And M. Halévy, who was having quiet fun at the expense of the mid-nineteenth century Evangelicals with their *seul doctrine* and *le simplisme brutal* of their theology—what would he have made of a group of Evangelicals who talked of “ covering the whole field of theological scholarship ”, and who would not get down to “ Justification by Faith ” until their tenth conference, in 1950 ? Dare one say that it was the kind of presumption which God, in His mercy, sometimes takes, redeems and uses ?

II

The first conference met at Ridley Hall in April 1942. Twenty-six Evangelical clergy, all under forty-five, prepared to commit themselves to some task of theological writing and research. It was cold bright weather, and they were boarding out here and there in Cambridge “ owing to the circumstances created by the war ”. They were a little self-conscious about the undertaking. Introductory papers were read and they divided into subject groups on Church History, The Bible, Christian Worship, Moral Theology and Sociology. It was a range-finding conference. “ Increasingly, as the conference proceeded, the fellowship became aware of the tentative and preparatory nature,

both of its plans and proposals, and of its composition." But the vision was there, and it was to be made clear to those who were subsequently invited to join that this was "a body of Evangelical Churchmen committed to the sacred task of writing and research, who had begun to realise the value, for the fulfilment of their task, of fellowship in prayer and discussion".

At the next conference, held at Wycliffe Hall in December of the same year, the vision faded and the project nearly foundered. The numbers were about the same but, as G. I. F. Thomson records in his book on *The Oxford Pastorate* (page 146), "circumstances dictated that the personnel present should be largely different, with the result that much of the old ground had to be covered again". There was a feeling of unrest and frustration. Was it going to be just another talking-shop? One member, now a Church dignitary, came very near to packing his bag and going home. Few present had done the suggested preparatory reading. Paper-readers tended to fumble with notes instead of reading from a typescript. There was a lot to learn, if the Fellowship was to keep together.

The Summer Conference in 1943, again at Wycliffe, went much better. A single conference subject was chosen—the Doctrine of Authority. Papers were better prepared. Members talked more freely about their subjects of research and writing, and there was useful discussion about books on various subjects which were urgently needed. A letter was read from an Evangelical scholar of an older generation about the sacrifice involved in such a pledge as the group had taken. Were they seriously prepared to forego hopes of promotion in the Church for the sake of scholarship, as he had done, or were they just playing with a nice idea? There was a growing sense that this was a serious business, requiring a corporate discipline not naturally congenial to Evangelicals.

Since 1943 a three-day conference has been held each summer. Ability to attend this regularly has been made a condition of membership for all but overseas members. Each year the papers and discussion gather round some major theological subject, e.g., "Revelation" (1944), "The Gospel and the Moral Law" (1948). A syllabus and bibliography are prepared several months beforehand by those chosen to read papers and circulated to allow adequate preparation. The dates of the conference are fixed a year ahead so that members may give it real priority over other engagements. In the last year or two there has been a conference sermon on the first evening, related to the theme of the conference. These sermons have been valued, apart from their individual merits, as a reminder that true theology is intimately related to the worship of God and is a form of the Church's witness to the Gospel. At each conference all those present report progress in research and writing. Even if there is not much progress to report, this has been accepted as a necessary discipline and a spur to further endeavours.

III

Apart from the annual conference, the Fellowship is held together by an annual printed register of members giving details of each member's subject of research, of recent books or articles and of forth-

coming books. This register makes possible an exchange of thought and information between those working in the same field, and allows others to get more expert advice on subjects peripheral to their main subject. It is particularly valuable for overseas members, for whom attendance at the annual conference is seldom possible.

From time to time subject-groups (on Church History, Worship, Sociology, etc.) have been active between conferences. Of these, the Church History group has the most consistent record of annual meetings, and those who belong to it have had the privilege of help from historians outside the Fellowship, such as Canon Charles Smyth and Mr. Gordon Rupp.

In recent years several members of the Fellowship have been chosen to serve in interdenominational and international theological conferences and conversations, and the wider experience of ecumenical thought thus gained by them has proved a valuable stimulus to the Fellowship as a whole. Owing chiefly to the foresight and generosity of one member, it has been possible, through a Special Fund, to assist the attendance of visitors from Germany at the annual conference. Two recent visitors, Dr. G. Stählin of Erlangen and Dr. M. Schmidt of the famous "confessional" Hochschule in Berlin, have contributed much in discussions and in less formal conversation.

The Fellowship has at present about 150 members. About half of them are parochial clergy in Britain or the Dominions; about a quarter, missionaries or on the staff of missionary societies; another quarter, university or theological college teachers. Membership is open to Anglican Evangelicals, laity as well as clergy, who are pledged, or are prepared to pledge themselves, to some definite task of theological research and writing, and who are under fifty at the time of election.

The Fellowship, still in the first decade of its life, must be judged by its aspirations rather than its achievements. Most of its members are comparatively youthful, and major works of theological scholarship are not to be expected for some years to come. Yet a number of books that owe their inspiration directly or indirectly to the Fellowship have been well received,¹ and much has been done already to suggest that such a community of research and writing has its place in the purpose of God for His Church, in stimulating the exercise of gifts which might otherwise have been atrophied under pressure of pastoral care and business, and in providing a school of honest criticism and of prayer.

Editor's Note. We are particularly grateful to Mr. Hewitt for the above short account of the Evangelical Fellowship of Theological Literature, as all too little is known of the contribution which the Fellowship is making to Anglican thought at the present time. Arrangements have been made to publish in our next issue the substance of the papers read at this year's Conference on the subject of Justification by Faith.

¹ e.g. the Canterbury Press books, *The Triumph of God*, and the forthcoming *The Fullness of Christ*—a report to the Archbishop of Canterbury parallel to *Catholicity* prepared by a group of sixteen members of the Fellowship.