The Biblical Basis of Evangelicalism

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ONE disadvantage of the passage of time is that the fine edges of definitions become dimmed. Terms which held clear and universally accepted meanings have to be re-examined with the passing of the years to guard against careless use, and to ensure that the original meaning is not overlaid with false emphasis, or encumbered with unnecessary detail.

The term "Evangelicalism" is a case in point. Historically, it can be seen that the basis of Evangelicalism, whether Anglican or Nonconformist in outlook, rested on the belief of its earliest exponents that the Bible contained that *evangel* which alone could arouse and save the souls of men. We may therefore consider those particular points of doctrine on which, by their emphasis, the Evangelicals have made a distinctive contribution to the Church of England. These may perhaps be reduced to six essentials: the fall of man; justification by faith in the atoning work of Christ; sanctification through the Spirit; individual and corporate worship, by the study and ministry of the Bible as the inspired Word of God, and by participation in the two sacraments of baptism and the Holy Communion; and lastly, faith in the personal return of Christ at the second advent. The impossibility of dealing adequately with such a vast field of theology is as clearly recognized as the fact that such doctrines as the Virgin Birth of our Lord and the priesthood of all believers have been omitted. Space, however, will only allow a brief reference to each of the points already mentioned, which it is hoped will corroborate the contention that in them, as revealed in the Bible, lies the basis of Evangelicalism.

I

First, the fall of man. The whole of the Old Testament, from Genesis chapter iii onwards, might be called one vast commentary on the text, "The soul that sinneth, it shall die". From the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden, to the threat contained in the closing words of the prophet Malachi, "lest I come and smite the earth with a curse", the reader is overwhelmed with evidence that some vital change of relationship has taken place between God and man since the day that "God saw everything that He had made, and behold, it was very good". St. Paul releases the secret in one arresting sentence: "Sin entered into the world, and death through sin". One of the early Evangelicals could say: "Having been found guilty of sin before the majesty of God, thereby you have dishonoured Him, in such a manner alienated yourself from God that you are unfit for His presence and glory, and have entailed an eternal curse upon you. But from these consequences you cannot *rescue* yourself". He therefore urged his people to realize "the total corruption of the heart, its being naturally without all godliness, pregnant with all sin, and impotent to recover the one, or destroy the dominion of the other". Insistence on man's inability to save himself, and on the divine

initiative and provision of a way of escape to satisfy both the holiness and justice of God, has always been a prime factor in Evangelical belief, as is illustrated by Aulen in his *Christus Victor*.

The way of atonement is by the sacrifice of the death of Christ. He who knew no sin was made to be sin for us, that our burden being transferred to the one perfect offering, we might go free. The whole sacrificial system, and in particular the Levitical offerings, centre around this divinely appointed method of obtaining forgiveness, summarized by Isaiah's forward and backward-looking word : " All we like sheep have gone astray ; we have turned every one to his own way ; and the Lord hath laid upon Him the iniquity of us all ". The distinctively Evangelical contribution to the doctrine of the atonement lies in the insistence on its substitutionary nature, as expressed in the words of the hymn :

> " Bearing shame and scoffing rude,
> In my place condemned He stood,
> Sealed my pardon with His blood."

Two centuries ago Walker of Truro exclaimed : " He offers Himself in our place, He makes an atonement, He runs between the living and the dead ; He cries : ' Here, sinners, come, come to Me, and you shall escape that horrible pit ; turn, follow Me, and you shall be safe ; O come to Me, and you shall not die ' ". Yet " all this was a free endurance. He merited not the least pang, or the least stripe ". But " in His death, sin hath been so fully punished, that all the ends of punishment are answered ". Evangelicals to-day would fully echo such intense, even passionate conviction, aroused through careful study of the scriptural revelation of our redemption.

On the manward side, salvation begins through a conviction of sin, which is a realization of a falling short of the glory of God, missing the mark, or turning aside out of the way. Then, to quote Walker again, " If thou hast sinned, the Lord has laid on Jesus thine iniquity ; and thinkest thou that He will demand punishment of thee also ? I tell thee God is satisfied ; justice is satisfied ; yea, I tell thee, believer, God would not be righteous and just if He did not forgive thy sins, and cleanse thee from all unrighteousness ". Justification then is by faith in the perfect righteousness of Christ, and the Holy Spirit provides such a persuasion of Christ's sufficiency to justify sinners as may determine them actually to call upon our Saviour for pardon and forgiveness. For God hath " made Him to be sin for us, who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him ". That it is " not of works lest any man should boast " was most powerfully impressed upon Berridge of Everton who asserted, " Christ will either be a whole Saviour or none at all. And if you think you have any good service of your own to recommend you unto God, you are certainly without any interest in Christ : Be you ever so sober, serious, just and devout, you are still under the curse of God, as I was, and knew it not, provided you have any allowed reliance on your own works, and think they are to do something for you, and Christ to do the rest ".[1]

[1] Quoted in *Simeon and Church Order*, by C. H. Smyth, p. 162*f*.

II

The third point of emphasis by Evangelicals is sanctification through the Holy Spirit. Here there is a certain divergence of view, two main schools of thought both claiming to interpret the true meaning of scripture. The one, following John Wesley, believed and taught that in an instant, and by a simple act of faith, perfection was wrought in the soul; it was *entire* sanctification received as an immediate gift from God in the second stage of Christian experience, sometimes called the Second Blessing. By this gift, wrote Wesley, the Christian "loveth the Lord his God with all his heart, and serveth Him with all his strength. He loveth his neighbour (every man) as himself; yea, as Christ loved us. In a word, he doeth the will of God on earth as it is done in heaven". Yet Wesley did not cease to press insistently for a growth in perfection. Had he used the term "perfect love" consistently, as he did on occasions, he would have avoided much confusion, and holiness would have been conceived of as a positive, active growth in love rather than a concentration on the cleansing or eradication of sin.

The other school interpreted the doctrine of sanctification as only finding absolute fulfilment in the world to come. Though spiritual life enters the soul at the new birth, yet the work of sanctification is a continual putting off the old man, and a daily crucifying of the flesh with its affections and lusts. Emphasis was laid on the continuous present tense of 1 John i. 7: "the blood of Jesus Christ, His Son, *keeps on* cleansing us from all sin". Through the Holy Spirit which God hath promised to them that obey Him, sanctification is effected in the heart of believers by God's ordering the circumstances of life according to spiritual needs, so enabling faith to be strengthened by the discovery that the enabling grace is given to meet those needs. The spiritual autobiography of St. Paul in Romans chapters vi to viii with its emphasis on the *knowledge* of our position in the sight of God, the *reckoning* of the self as dead to sin but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord, and the exhortation to *yield* all the members as servants to righteousness unto holiness—this speaks to the Evangelical of every age. We all find our spiritual experience in part in these great chapters, and the great incentive to press on until we too can say we have obeyed the exhortation to a full surrender contained in the twelfth chapter: "I beseech you, therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies, a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service".

III

Perhaps the emphasis of the early Evangelicals on corporate worship has been rather superseded in later years by a stress on the importance of private devotion. Yet the example of the early Church in meeting together for fellowship, for the breaking of bread and prayer, is reinforced by the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews who warns his readers not to forsake the assembling of themselves together as the manner of some is. Here we are dealing with a controversial subject, but the facts must be faced. What is it that more than anything else makes the Evangelicals a distinct party in the Church of England?

Not so much their emphasis on the need for evangelism ; High Church and Low are agreed on that point. Certainly not their presentation of the doctrine of the atonement, with which many Anglo-Catholics agree; nor the stress laid on the necessity for conversion ; not even the receptionist doctrine of the Holy Communion, or faith in the potential regeneration of children at infant baptism, though here we come nearer to the heart of the problem. Surely the foundation of Evangelicalism lies in its doctrine of the Church and Ministry ; its declaration that " upon this rock " Christ will build His Church refers not to St. Peter, but to St. Peter's statement affirming the divinity of Christ ; its emphasis on the one Mediator between God and man, even Jesus Christ ; its insistence that the Christian minister is *presbuteros*, not *sacerdos* ; and in the early days of its revival, that its followers should combine individual devotion, prayer, and the study of the Word of God, with regular public worship and fellowship, not valuing either at the expense of the other.

Despite this fact, it is disturbing to recognize that there is virtually no authoritative text book on the Evangelical doctrine of the Church and Ministry. Perhaps no greater good could be done to the Evangelical cause than for a group to spend some years in producing a book on this vital and so strangely neglected subject. For the liturgy of the Church of England, derived as it is from scriptural sources, gives to Evangelicals a security that is of immense value in itself, forming a strong deterrent to those who might be attracted by the apparent advantages of nonconformity. " How often in your hearing," cried Henry Venn the elder to Mr. Powley, " how often in the Church, have I declared the superior excellency, in my judgment of the Liturgy to every mode of worship, not only amongst the dissenters, but that had ever been in the Church of Christ, as far as I had knowledge : nay, more than once have I said, I never was present at any meeting where I perceived the power of godliness, as amongst the congregations of our Church, where the Gospel is preached ".

The Anglican minister is ordained to the ministry of the Word and Sacraments ; and as has so often been pointed out, the ministry of the Word is placed first. " It pleased God by the foolishness of preaching, to save them that believe," wrote St. Paul. The Evangelical must still place the preaching of the Gospel, by lip and by life, as his foremost duty ; for the Word of God is still living and powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword. It is largely ignorance of the Bible which has produced the pagan outlook so widespread to-day ; for " faith cometh by hearing ; and hearing by the Word of God ". A congregation instructed in the Word of God and the meaning of the Prayer Book is, and must be, an evangelizing force in any town or neighbourhood. It was the preaching of the Word by the Wesleys and Whitefield, by Venn, Romaine, Grimshaw and Walker, and in a later generation by Charles Simeon, Robertson of Brighton, and many another, that drew souls to the Saviour, and brought the blessings of the gospel to human hearts, leading to lives of devotion and service to the Kingdom of God.

Yet though this is the prime object of our ministry, it is not the only object, and herein lies the danger for Evangelical clergy. The Lord's

table cannot be neglected for the pulpit. Too much may be allowed to depend upon the personality of a single individual, and upon the ministry of preaching in isolation from the whole body of corporate worship. The early Evangelicals did not make this mistake. Jones of Creaton and Grimshaw of Haworth were both renowned for the number of their communicants, and they with others, years before the Oxford Movement, urged the necessity of more frequent Communion services. Again, it was through the instrumentality of Evangelicals that evening celebrations were introduced in many churches beginning just a century ago; though Hook, the High Church Vicar of Leeds, is credited with originating the practice. Our Lord's command to take, eat, and drink of His precious Body and Blood as recorded in the gospels, is the basis of this central act of Christian unity, emphasizing our membership of that great fellowship of the Church, which is His Body. Moreover, attendance at this service is also a public confession of faith, as Walker of Truro, among other early Evangelicals, was quick to recognize. In the use of the sacraments, he declared, " there is an actual profession of Christ, and engagement to cleave to Him as His servant and soldier. A man taking the sacrament, the oath of a Christian soldier, doth in the most direct manner engage himself to be loyal to his Lord, and publishes to the world that he belongs to the service of the Lord Jesus ".

With regard to infant baptism, the Evangelical points to the covenant conception of Christianity and the analogy of circumcision in the Old Testament; to the Lord's invitation to the children as recorded by St. Mark; to the words, " The promise is to you and to your children "; and to the supposition that the household baptisms in the New Testament included the children as well as the adults. " It is a great comfort to us," wrote Henry Venn, " that Christ orders and commands us to bring our children to Him, and dedicate them to the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost—the God whom we adore—pouring water upon them, to signify their natural pollution, and the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Ghost ". That such regeneration could be potential and not necessarily conveyed in baptism, was a cardinal point in the judgment of the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council on the Gorham case in 1850.

IV

As a last distinctive article of Evangelicalism, belief in the personal return of our Lord at the Second Coming should be mentioned. This doctrine is so clearly and so frequently mentioned in scripture, in verses so familiar to us all, that only one example need be given, and that perhaps the most conclusive. As the apostles stood gazing upward at our Lord's Ascension, they heard the angelic voices proclaiming, " This same Jesus which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen Him go into heaven ".

This great hope of the Church has for many centuries been a neglected article of the creed. But to one of the early Evangelicals at least it aroused feelings of intense anticipation. During his last sermon at Truro in 1760, Samuel Walker declared: " I believe that He who died for our sins, is gone away into heaven to prepare a place for His people;

from thence I am expecting Him to come again with power and great glory, to receive them unto Himself, that they may be with Him where He is. . . . I regard it as the day of my Lord's eminent triumph, when He shall come in the glory of the Father, with great power and unequalled majesty, attended by the hosts of heaven . . . when every eye shall see Him, and they that pierced Him shall own that He is no other than the crucified Jesus ; when by His royal word He shall . . . bid a new heaven and earth to come forth . . . provided with every circumstance of greatness, glory, and beauty, to receive for ever His happy saints ". Such eloquence must endorse the opinion of no less an authority than Charles Simeon that the sermons of Walker of Truro are the best in the English language.

" Look unto the rock whence ye are hewn " is a salutary exhortation for us all to obey on occasions. In turning to the Scriptures as the source of our authority we find full and repeated evidence that the Word of God is indeed the basis of Evangelicalism. We find in addition that those honoured figures who first bore the name of Evangelicals looked to the same source for their inspiration and power. The written word proclaims the living Word ; in it we find the good news of our redemption from that corrupt and evil nature which we all inherit. We find also the promise of the wisdom and guidance of the Holy Spirit, that He may lead us into all the truth, so that we may grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Here, too, is unfolded a plan of worship—of prayer, praise, and preaching ; the gift of the sacraments, and of the Word of God to be read and pondered over. And from this same source we receive assurance of the return of our Saviour in glory.

" Glory be to God for this Book," wrote Henry Venn to his god-daughter ; " . . . it is full of dark sayings . . . this must be allowed. But there is a Divine Teacher, given to all, who before they read this Book from heaven, ask Him of God. May you every day desire this Teacher ! and say ' Open Thou mine eyes, that I may see the wonders of Thy law ! ' So I began. So your honoured father and mother began, many years ago ; and the Book that was dark, and of little use, is now our delight, sweeter than the honey-comb—more than all manner of riches ".

So is the Word of God the basis of Evangelicalism, shining forth continually to us, as to our spiritual ancestors, a lamp to our feet and a light to our path.