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# The Relevance of the Conservative- Evangelical Position To-day

A Layman's View

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AS the modern theological debate moves inexorably forward—ever more intriguing as it becomes more complicated—it is the conviction of the present writer that the historically held Conservative-Evangelical position in religion is not only recovering much lost ground, but also that its own particular genius of theological approach is gaining in relevance, as this mighty debate proceeds. The attempt to demonstrate this implies that one has found it valid, defensible and convincing. To some this may sound either a bold or a reactionary statement (I intend to plead that it is neither); but unless we are content that the present resurgence of Evangelicalism is to be merely a temporary and emotional reaction to the present *mal de siècle*, clear necessity is laid upon us of attempting to demonstrate what proper rational grounds we have for advocating the adoption of this view midway through the twentieth century. Augustine, Aquinas and Calvin were all active Christian men; but their occupation with the affairs of Heaven did not lead them to neglect the task of showing the relevance of Christianity to the movements of their day—whether to the Manichee heresy, to the Islamic philosophy of Averrhoes, or to Renaissance Humanism.

The fact is that our present materialistic century is one of the most fundamentally theological of all the centuries in the nature of its problems. Atheism contains, in Dr. Huxley's words, "a God-shaped blank". Communism is at base theological in its errors. Nor have some quite outstanding modern historians, such as Professors Toynbee and Butterfield, failed to grasp this point. Our world has had a surfeit of its own wisdom, only to find that this wisdom's ultimate reality was the Hydrogen Bomb. Thus it is that our age cries out for a solution to its problems given on the authority of God.

Nor do we need to do more than remind ourselves that this is precisely what the Church has always believed about its own message and teachings: namely that it had them on the authority of God. By way of evidence for this it has pointed to the supernatural character of the Bible, which constitutes its foundation document: its majesty of thought, its diversity of writers but unity of theme, its supreme influence for good, and its survival of all attempts to subvert or suppress it. We may say—with the sole exception of the comparatively recent modernist movement—that this is agreed Church teaching. All the historic Church Confessions speak in this sense—Trent and Vatican for the Roman Church, Augsburg, Westminster and the Thirty-nine Articles for the major branches of the Protestant Church. The Eastern Orthodox also have the traditional high regard for Holy

Scripture. It is therefore a simple statement of fact to say that the Christian Church speaks with one voice on the subject of its Scriptures. There follow some quotations about Scripture from the official Councils and Confessions :

Trent, Session IV. “ (The synod) following the examples of the orthodox fathers, receives and venerates . . . all the books both of the Old and of the New Testament, seeing that *one God is the author of both* . . . ”

Vatican Council. “ The Church holds (the Old and New Testaments) to be sacred and canonical, not because, having been composed by mere human industry they were afterwards approved by her authority ; nor merely because they contain revelation with no admixture of error ; but because, *having been written by the inspiration of the Holy Ghost*, they have God for their author.”

Formula of Concord (Lutheran). “ The sole rule and standard according to which all dogmas, together with all teachers, should be estimated and judged, are the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures. . . . The holy Scriptures alone remain the only judge, rule and standard, according to which all dogmas shall be discerned and judged.”

Westminster Confession. “ Under the name of Holy Scripture, or the Word of God written, are now contained all the books of the Old and New Testaments. . . . All which are given by inspiration of God, to be the rule of faith and life.”

Anglican Article VI. “ Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation : so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith. . . . ” See also Articles VIII, XX, and XXI.

Even in the statements of the Nicene Creed, the two phrases “ according to the Scriptures ”, as validating the items of belief, and with reference to the Holy Ghost, “ Who spake by the Prophets,” bear eloquent credal testimony to the antiquity and validity of our belief. In his Bampton Lectures on “ Inspiration ”, Dr. Sanday said of the Fathers : “ Testimonies to the general doctrine of inspiration may be multiplied to almost any extent ”. Thus it cannot be made too clear that what Evangelicals are committed to defend is not any private dogma of their own, but the *Church Doctrine* of where the authority of God is to be found. So it is that for our modern world the longed-for discovery of the authority of God can only come through the re-discovery of God speaking through the Holy Scripture.

The foundation of all Christian life and thinking is that this mortal life is the framework and setting of our confrontation with the Living God, Who “ worketh all things after the counsel of His own will ” (Eph. i. 11). God has at all times been the most dominant—ironically also the most ignored—factor in the affairs of men. He is as dominant in world history as He is in personal salvation. Now since the biblical pattern of revelation is an historical one, these two are interconnected. This means that God was in control, not only in the actual giving of His revelation in Scripture, but concurrently also in the lives and antecedent family histories of the men who proclaimed and wrote the Scriptures. There is thus a double line of divine control in the process

of inspiration—direct control of the writers' thought-patterns, and remote control of their whole background. Conservative Evangelicals are thus *not* in the position of believing that Scripture was unnaturally dictated, with the writers as inhuman automata whose minds were temporarily in suspense. Nothing could be further from the facts of the case.

There are several other supposed difficulties, by which those who in our day reject the Church view of Inspiration seek to justify their position. There are of course *some* difficulties in believing *anything* about the Supernatural: such difficulties belong also to the Incarnation and the Resurrection, which we likewise do not fully understand. It is essential, however, to dispose of those objections which rest only on a misunderstanding of the case. These points must now engage our attention.

(1) Inspiration is often spoken of as something residing in the text, whereas it is really an existential relationship between text and author. This present article carries a degree of "inspiration" in that it is exactly related (has full positive correlation) to my thought-patterns on this subject. It is "inspired" with reference to me. So also, the Bible is Inspired with reference to God. It is not the phenomenon of inspiration, so much as the Author, who is entirely different. Thus the text itself has no special mystique, and Conservative Evangelicals are not necessarily bound to be literal in their interpretation. (2) Since a written revelation is a matter of words, the inspiration of the Bible must necessarily have some connection with its words—which is all that is meant by "verbal inspiration". We do not however think that the words are the primary factor—rather indeed the thought-content is primary. We thus hold that the full inspiration of the thought-content does also extend *downwards* as far as the words, which must therefore also be called inspired. It is no more possible to express thought without words, than to do arithmetic without figures!

(3) Now, although we believe, in this proper sense, in verbal inspiration, we are not thereby involved in holding that there was *only one* possible biblical text. This is most important in the present very fruitful state of Textual (Lower) Criticism. For example, this article could have been written in several ways, all with the same general drift. I can amend and change the form of individual sentences without thereby changing their general meaning. Some expressions suit more than others, a certain procession of thought satisfies me more; but all would do, and all variations originating from me would drive on to the same conclusion, which is my main thesis. Conservative Evangelicals welcome therefore textual research and the great adventure of finding out the true original. (4) Again, it is commonly objected that the doctrine of full inspiration would mean that all parts of the Bible were of equal value. But it is a *non sequitur* that equal inspiration means equal importance. Inspiration may be likened to the bloodstream of the body. Every cell of the body must be nourished by the bloodstream of the body, or die. Now this does not by any means imply that, for example, a man's *hair* is as important as his *brain*, though they both depend on the same bloodstream. A man may manage without his hair, though not without his brain. Thus

there is an obvious *non sequitur* in the objection. By saying that II Chronicles is equally inspired with St. John's Gospel, we are *not* saying that it is equally important, only that "one God is the Author of both". (5) One sometimes hears it said that the Word of God is *in* the Bible, rather than the Bible as such. This is not a possible position apologetically, since God has either spoken or not spoken, and if (as is Christian belief) He has spoken, then His speaking must have definite shape and limits. But the conclusive argument against this very untheological theory is that, if only parts of the Bible are the Word of God, then it is we ourselves—the recipients of the message—who would have to decide just where and to what extent God is speaking. This would be an intolerable situation, and would effectively destroy the whole authority of God's Word. It would be better not to defend inspiration at all, than to defend partial inspiration; for the sinner, not the Holy Spirit, would become the final arbiter of God's Word.

That the points enumerated above do not cover all the possible objections or alternative theories about inspiration I am well aware, though I offer them in the hope that they be of use on this subject. After all, the more puerile type of objection—such as that Evangelicals are committed to the Authorized (King James') Version of the Bible, or that we are bound to a literal interpretation of the "days" of Genesis—should be well enough disposed of by now. Did not the Puritans actually *prefer* the Geneva Bible to the Authorized Version; and did not commentators so long ago as St. Augustine interpret the "days" of Genesis in a symbolic sense? Yet in order to be properly equipped to take part in the current debate on this most important subject, it is of the highest importance for all Evangelicals to be well read in their own scholarly writings in all the various fields over which debate ranges. Only so can the current attack be held, or Evangelicalism ever worthily find its voice. The principal divisions of the discussion are fairly clear, and it is well to arrange one's reading in these divisions. There are five such divisions: (a) Inspiration; (b) Bible (Pentateuch; Isaiah and Daniel; Gospels); (c) Science; (d) Philosophy; (e) Theology. Evangelical scholars have now produced excellent writings in all these fields, the most important among many being probably Warfield, Ramm, Van Til, Allis and Young. Since the revival of Kierkegaard studies, the current of discussion has been running in the Evangelical direction, and the present situation could—given diligence—be used to present the Gospel at the very highest intellectual level. That this has not been done before has perhaps largely been due to the influence of pietism; until it is done we shall not have fulfilled our duty.

Liberal theologians are usually frank enough to admit that on the basis of their own presuppositions and method of thinking, they have not yet solved *the problem which is basic in any religion*, namely that of Authority. As we have seen this was not a problem for the Church until rather more than a century ago. "The Bible to prove, the Church to teach" has frequently been a convenient summary of the Church view. The Church indeed has a certain teaching authority—Evangelicals would not wish to deny this—but the Bible has always been, both for the Church and for its members, the supreme court of

appeal. Dean Goode (nominated to be Bishop of Peterborough before his untimely death) has made the classic statement for Evangelicals on this subject in his "The Divine Rule of Faith and Practice", which all should try to read. On the other hand Liberal theologians have usually maintained with great conviction that the traditional Evangelical view—here defended—breaks down on the basis of objections to *particular points*. In particular the development of scientific studies in the last century is alluded to, though I do not think myself that Science has in any way undermined the Evangelical position. Of course new light in any field will always dispose of certain ancient ideas; but new light is always welcome, and since all truth is God's truth, it is clear that there can be no real divergence between the record of God's works and of His Word.

The resultant position from the consideration of these two points is that Evangelicalism has not been, and is not being, opposed on the grounds of its methodology (that is, its basis of authority in an inspired Bible) and no alternative systematic methodology has been proposed by Liberal theologians. Rather, it is on particular points—scientific, historical and textual—that Evangelicalism has been judged inadequate. Indeed, judged *so* inadequate in the popular theological view, that few people now pause to give it credit for its demonstrably superior methodology—which has the additional advantage of being the ancient Church view. Here is the vital point at which responsible Evangelical thinkers should press with all their weight of argument and influence to cause a reconsideration to be made. There is a certain sense in which it is better to have a sound total system which may be difficult to defend at particular points, than a disparate set of sound views which do not cohere in an intelligible system. Evangelicalism is a far more flexible system than many of its critics imagine, and at various points is able to allow a variety of views within the limits of loyalty to Scripture. No doubt the older school of Evangelicalism did make our belief more difficult of acceptance and defence by an unnecessary intransigence at certain points. Many of these—particularly the historical points—are not now subject to exact verification, but the burden of disproof rests on the challenger. Our case remains intact on particulars so long as we can show that the attack is "not proven".

Thus while on particular points Evangelicals may be said, not without reason, to have held the attack (Dr. Ramm has recently examined these points with minute exactness in his recent book, *The Christian View of Science and Scripture*, now published by Paternoster Press), on their general methodology they may be said to be triumphant. It will just not do for Modernists to state that the theological question of Authority is still an open one, and—like Luther at the Diet of Worms—to ask for more time in the resolving of it. For indeed, it is only an open question on their method of having reopened it. On the basis of Liberal Theology it is not likely that there will ever be a solution to this problem. This question can no longer go unanswered, nor can it be indefinitely shelved. Liberal Christianity must be required, not merely to criticize, but positively to produce its own methodological basis of authority, so as to exhibit this

for critical examination. It is the responsibility of Evangelicals to see that this point is argued home. The Conservative Evangelical thesis, however, is that it never did become necessary to abandon the Church view, and moreover that insoluble theological chaos results when it is abandoned.

With these points in mind, the utility and function of the Canon becomes clear. Authority in the Christian religion could only come from one of three sources—either direct from Christ, from the corporate decisions of the Church, or from a supernatural revelation engrafted in a document. Clearly Christ, Church and Bible belong to the same unitary and existential complex, and must not be arrayed against one another. One of them, however, must be—not perhaps ultimate in the absolute sense—but ultimate for us in the Church. Our Roman Catholic friends correctly see this. Now, Christ cannot be a present ultimate unless visions of Him were to become general; the Church has a ruling authority but cannot be our ultimate, unless like Romanists or Orthodox we believe it to be infallible (see Anglican Articles 19, 20 and 21); there remains the high doctrine of the inspired and authoritative Bible, which is the infallible Word of God. This doctrine has its supreme defence in the works of Professor B. B. Warfield, who stands out as *facile princeps* among recent biblical theologians.

The Bible thus conceived may be viewed as being a kind of divinely enclosed reservoir with deep water-pressure. The pressure depends entirely on the walls of this reservoir being maintained intact. Once open the flood-gates (as the Higher Criticism has attempted to do, either by reopening the question of the Canon, or by devaluating its contents), and immediately the "water-pressure" of authority is lost, the water itself being dispersed throughout the surrounding—and no doubt *similar*—territory (Apocrypha). Of this process there are two possible results in religion: (a) on no point is the answer sure, and all points become open to universal, never-ending debate: this is Liberal Christianity; (b) some particular Church agency—be it monarchical or oligarchical—is granted the power of decision and definition: this is Roman or Greek Christianity. Both (a) and (b) constitute departures from the theological integrity of the Church Canon which it is the greatest achievement and service of the Reformation Fathers to have upheld for us in the West. Thus it is that Rome in particular has adopted a purely arbitrary solution in its authoritarian Papacy, whilst Liberalism never will find a solution of any kind. It is strange indeed if Christ founded Holy Church without giving it a basis of authority, or if He intended a violent change in theology through the discovery of the true basis after the lapse of nineteen centuries, and then only after a lengthy and confused period of diverse speculation. At any time it would have been rash for Evangelicals to exchange a good apologetic for an arbitrary or non-existent one. They are even less likely to do so now when the focus of theology is moving back once more to the ancient and biblical view which it is their privilege to present to the modern world.

All to whom this sacred trust has been committed, especially those in high position in the Church, must realize the need to brief themselves thoroughly in the exposition of their system in its integrity. It is of

no value nominally to defend our position whilst actually giving away some of its most vital ground. Nor on the contrary must the defence itself be abandoned by refuge in a purely pietistic biblicism which is naïvely and even morbidly suspicious of formulating a philosophical apologetic of faith. We have been badly served in both these ways in the past. Unchurchly, even anti-churchly movements have tended to dominate our thinking from the outside ; our own leaders have tended to cease being our spokesmen so soon as they attained any ecclesiastical eminence. This dual tendency seems now to have ceased somewhat, but Evangelicalism does not yet possess a sufficiently large number of eminent leaders for it to make its voice heard with proper force in the Church and the world. In God's good time this also will eventuate ; and it is the challenge of the present to all Christians, as in the days of pagan Rome, not only to out-live and out-die, but also to *out-think* their opponents. This can only be done by taking the total non-Christian world view, and opposing to it a total and systematically integrated Christian world-view. How can this ever be done except on the basis of a belief that Christian Truth is divinely revealed, given within limits that are divinely set, so that we may distil therefrom a philosophy and view of life which shall be in accordance with the ultimate reality which is the God of Jesus Christ and of the Bible? Historic Christianity cannot truly be defended in terms of Deism or semi-Deism. The only God we can speak of is the God of Christ and Scripture. God has not acted for our redemption, then left us to guess at His meaning as in a dumb charade. All our guesses would be wrong ; all our interpretations would be inadequate to grasp the purpose of God. Ironically enough, even if correct, they would only be correct *guesses*—which is all that the writings of the Evangelists and Apostles are, if they are not supernaturally inspired.

Evangelical belief is that God not only came to save us in the person of Christ, but that He also spoke to interpret His action in a unique record which was providentially controlled and divinely mediated. The task of worthily presenting this apologetic, to which the times do call us, is as important as the missionary task itself. The dilemma of the philosophers and of non-revelational theology is emphasizing the relevance of the Conservative Evangelical position to-day.

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