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AN EVANGELICAL MINISTRY<sup>1</sup>

## I

THE term "Evangelical" is used here not as the synonym of the modern expression "Non-Roman". It is richer and more definite in content than the Augsburg Confession, and finds its fullest systematic expression in the great Reformed Confessions. In Scotland, whence its seed was carried over the oceans of the world, its classic expression is found in the theological and homiletic literature of the seventeenth-century Reformers. *There* is found the travail of Scotland's soul for the "Crown Rights of the Redeemer", a beautiful and all-embracing term for the Sovereignty of Christ. This has been translated by the Confessional Church of Germany, in its similar life-and-death struggle with Totalitarianism, into the phrase: "Freedom of the Gospel."

The triumphant issue of that century-long heroic and bloody struggle in Scotland was a democratic monarchy under which civil and religious liberty are secure. But it should never be forgotten that this security of justice and freedom was the *fruit* and not the *root* of the struggle of Scottish piety. The great Dutch statesman, Groen Van Prinsterer, in tracing the religious freedom and political ideals of the Netherlands to their true source, unhesitatingly proclaimed: "Calvinism the source and guarantee of our constitutional liberties." Of our Scottish heritage of freedom the facts of history loudly proclaim its origin and guarantee in the triumphant struggle of our Reformed and evangelical ancestors.

In the present terrible struggle against sinful man's fiendish perversion of his mental and physical powers it is necessary to have that fact constantly in our view. For spiritual issues are deeply involved in the present war. Our reasons for this conviction are based on the fundamental doctrines of evangelical Christianity. Such ideas as liberty, social justice, and the infinite value of the human personality, which atheists as well as

<sup>1</sup> The Address delivered by the Rev. Professor D. Maclean at the opening of the Free Church College, Edinburgh, for Session 1941-42.

Christians have on their lips to-day, are a totally inadequate description of the truth and are essentially weak unless they have behind them an evangelical conviction concerning the world and society. There is more required of us than such urbane and civilised points of view, which, according to many, have validity even though their evangelical presuppositions are denied. Indeed many publicists of such schools of thought dogmatically assured us that a scientifically ordered progress was leading us inevitably towards a millennium. So much did that idea become a normal part of modern thought that, when the Nemesis of such unfounded suppositions came upon us in Germany's barbaric display of human wickedness, none have been more stunned into helpless silence than those loud scientific vocalists.

It may help us to understand in a measure how the present religious ineffectiveness has arisen if we sketch briefly the historical background in an effort to assess fairly the situation that confronts us.

## II

During the eighteenth century, Deism, which spread over the British Islands and Ireland, had in Scotland its baneful effect on religion and morals in deplorably lowering the power and responsibility of the national pulpit. The average moderate of the age had his theological beliefs reduced to the narrowest limits, and such beliefs as he had were the product of a system of thought that harmonised self-regard with disinterestedness, identified virtue with beauty and morality with aesthetics. A typical example was the notorious Dr. "Jupiter" Carlyle who stood forth as an unrivalled authority on mutton and claret, but correspondingly as poor a judge of sustaining spiritual viands. To the youth of the Lothians, drilling against the dreaded Napoleonic invasion, he offered nothing better than the empty surds of Stoic ethics. "Virtue," he exclaimed to them, "secures to us the protection of the Almighty." But the faith that triumphed over absolutism in the previous century was not dead. The evangelicals of the time, inside and outside the establishment, holding fast by the fundamental tenet of their witness that a time of seriousness demands an unshakable faith, faced the terrors of their time with the sure confidence with which Calvin challenged the King of France, "a confidence",

said Calvin, "which is not appalled by the terrors of death, and, therefore, not even by the judgment seat of God". Thus, the evangelical ministry of Scotland saved the soul and honour of Scotland for a second time in a national crisis.

When we come to the nineteenth century we find that its characteristic note in matters of religion was social Christianity. The evangelical witness had itself become diluted by the so-called "liberalism", featured by the theological thought that it became easy for the Church to conform to the general contemporary trend of life towards social Christianity. The problem of slums and poverty that spread rapidly in industrial centres as a result of the factory system, characteristic of the industrial revolution, led Churches and Churchmen to regard the appalling problem of the "lapsed masses" that confronted them as challenging their Christian profession. With firm conviction, held sincerely by many during many years past, Churches devoted themselves almost wholly, and with amazing industry and organisation, to the social application of their Christian faith in their congregations and among the community in general. Let us briefly enquire what have been the effects on the community and on the Christian faith of this tremendous expenditure of Christian zeal and endeavour?

### III

The answer is sadly easy. The flood-tide to the Churches has, alas, not set in. The prejudices and hostility of sinful man have not been softened by the undoubted social amelioration effected. The heedless multitude still pass by. But even more serious is the reaction which the social application of Christianity has had upon the faith itself. Revealed truth itself cannot be affected by human reactions, for the Word of the Lord endures for ever. Nevertheless, the attempts to apply Christianity socially have profoundly affected the meaning which the Christian faith has for the average man and ordinary churchgoer. The emphasis on the social has largely stifled the spiritual nature of the faith. It has obscured the revealed fact that the Christian message was primarily to and for individuals. That the Son of God became man, and that man must be born again, are sufficiently strong reminders to us of the divine estimate of the immortal soul of man. The great doctrines of grace,

which the Bible so unmistakably connects with the redemption of the human personality, have been so rarely emphasised during more than a generation that, not only have these doctrines become unknown, but the spiritual faculties of hearers have been so weakened by disuse that spiritual discernment has faded away. The Church of to-day is consequently faced with the difficult but necessary task, arising from her former neglect, of re-educating her people in the fundamental elements of the faith which give it the character and distinction of being the Christian faith of revelation. For the business of the Church in its God-given mission is to the individual and through the individual to society. Moreover, the Christian revelation holds out no hope for society except in so far as the men and women who form it are Christian, which for the secular State is a futile and unattainable ideal. It is therefore all the more essential that the truth should be understood that a Christian society can only be fashioned out of and by Christian men and women.

#### IV

The foregoing brings us directly to the question of the character, functions and place of an evangelical ministry in the redemptive purpose of God to the world in which we now live.

*Firstly.*—An evangelical ministry is a *ministry of God's Word*. There can then be no uncertainty as to the message the evangelical minister should deliver. For Christ did not surrender the future of His Kingdom and Church to the uncertain inventions and clever conceptions of men. The message, therefore, was and is always invested with His divine authority and is intended for all the world. It is the good tidings of salvation for a lost world. Consequently not only is it a message of transforming power and eternal significance, but is intended to be applied in every sphere of life by regenerate men and women. For in "eating my flesh and drinking my blood," and in partaking of the bread that came down from heaven, Christ surely teaches here that those who find in Himself their source of power have a spiritual quality of life not only for the future, but also for our present existence.

There is a craving, characteristic of our desperate time, for an authority in thought that would give peace and comfort.

The minister of the Word must thus have theology in his preaching, and as the revelation of God is the content and concern of theology, it should give an adequate response to this craving. For any theology that is evangelical must be based on revelation, for otherwise theology degenerates into a department of sociology.

Evangelical ministers, holding their high commission as ambassadors of Christ, must ever plead with men to be reconciled to God. When people are reconciled to God they are in fact at peace with one another. From this peace, conditioned by faith in Jesus Christ, can alone arise a state of mutual peace among peoples of nations and a fellowship in peace of the states constituted of these reconciled peoples. When the evangelical ministry in this manner realises more fully its own God-given command and power, it will clarify its spiritual insights into the human situation and give expression to these. Then will the ministry think as God thinks and will as God wills. With self-confidence which rests on confidence in God it will utter the solemn warnings and encouragements of God's Word. In this exercise of his calling and gifts the evangelical minister is called upon to-day in particular to redeem the ministry of the Word from the unworthy, but not unmerited, stigma of exasperating the ills of our times with its empty moralisms and unattainable ideals. This can be done through God's Spirit when the ministry proclaims unhesitatingly and in simplicity the redemptive Gospel committed to its trust with full relevance to the situation and perplexities of people everywhere. It calls upon us to accept certain divine realities, which are the dynamic force which alone can create the ideal personality and the ideal society. It does not invite us to achieve something, but it does invite us to receive something. It makes available for us the new life which God offers and on which a new world can be reared.

*Secondly.*—The evangelical ministry is in God's hands a *regenerating instrument*. As such it must be the interpreter of the Christian faith to society by witnessing for truth so as to form a leaven in the lump. Thus, life through the agency of such ministry is transformed according to the pattern revealed in Christ. Accordingly the message, if faithfully lived and delivered, while it is directly concerned with the spiritual life of people, is, as a result of its spiritual potency, a transformer of

the political and social life of society. Such a transformation is most clearly seen in the great institutions, cultural and social, which had their origin in the Christian faith. These followed the impact of the teaching and lives of those whom Christ sent forth to call the world to obedience to His sovereign sway. To-day, therefore, as at all times, the primary privilege and service of this ministry must be the regeneration of men who will become creators of a better and more really Christian civilisation. For, as Count Keyserling observes, the noblest and most truly human feature of even the Russian experiment in Communism is the direct influence of the Christian spirit. It is likewise true, and admitted now by unbelievers, that the best in our civilisation had been the fruit of Christian influence mediated by the Christian Church. For that reason, and in view of the hoped-for issue of the present gigantic struggle, it cannot be overemphasised that the need for an evangelical ministry is as urgent to-day and to-morrow as is the palpable truth that people have to be spiritualised to fit into a Christian society. Justice and freedom are permanent and vital elements in our civilisation. For these none can struggle as Christians should, for they have their seat in the holy will of God and their vindication in the triumph of the Cross of Calvary.

*Thirdly.*—An evangelical ministry is a *nourishing ministry*.

It was Calvin who wrote of the "visible Church" that "we should learn from her single title mother, how useful, nay, how necessary, the knowledge of her is, since there is no other means of entering into life unless she conceive us in the womb and give us birth, unless she nourish us at her breasts, and, in short, keep us under her charge and government, until, divested of mortal flesh, we become like the angels".

It is now sadly admitted even in evangelical communions that in recent times the great doctrines of grace, and the Word of God which is the children's bread, have been but stintingly served to their famishing children, and with that came a corresponding decline in the reformatory discipline of the nursing mother of the family. Thus the actual spiritual relationship of mother and child has been greatly forgotten, and, consequently, its formulation and expression in word and conduct.

## V

This has been largely due to the decay of religious belief consequent on Christianity being looked at mainly through the eyes of science, as the most vigorous exponents of that process, in America in particular, now regretfully admit. The God of this process became a cognitive inference, a mere deduction from the facts observed by scientific investigation. This was not Christianity, and decidedly not evangelical Christianity. Synchronising with this theological decay was a borrowing by the Church from the State of its economic and industrial method of organisation and production, not dissimilar in form and result from what obtained in the Imperial Roman Church at its inception. The modern Church was captivated by these borrowings, and urged, as it is still doing, mass production in the form of featureless and dead uniformity in organisation and method, without the binding and impelling power of unity in the faith. This process sterilised the Church's spirituality and weakened her ethical effectiveness. The value of the human personality was lost in the mass production.

The Church now bewails her impotence and the heedlessness of the dehumanised hordes around her. Here, indeed, lies her hope of recovering lost power by rediscovering the God of revelation. Moreover, if the evangelical Churches are to rediscover their own soul and their divinely promised power, there is no alternative for them but to examine themselves in the light of Holy Scripture. For if the Church or ministry is to "nourish" us "and keep us under her charge and government", as Calvin says, her ministry must of necessity be evangelical. The primary privilege and duty of an evangelical ministry is to confess and expound the redemptive will of God. The people of God are accordingly nourished for life here as well as hereafter. For they are not only to be nourished, but also to be taken in charge and governed. In this way purpose and direction are to be given to their lives under the governing laws of the Kingly rule of Christ. It is evident that the spiritually nourished life, like the nourished physical life, must manifest and prove its reality in all the activities of our complex human life. From this it follows that we have a relation, profound in its significance, to society, or the political hierarchy, which is the State. This State as revealed and evangelically conceived

is also a minister of God. As such it is a sign of the patience of God with the world even of the unredeemed, who, as well as the redeemed, are under the sway of Jesus Christ until the day when He shall make all things new.

Knox and our Scottish Reformers realised this truth and inculcated its implication. Consequently they insisted on the application of this conception unreservedly in the political and economic spheres. Their dominant ideas of justice and freedom were enshrined in the "Crown Rights of the Redeemer". In the economic sphere the just and fair distribution of nature's resources found expression in their Christian sense of stewardship, with its implication of unswerving double loyalty to the honour of God and the sacredness of the human personality privileged before God to an equality of right to God's gifts. This was emphasised by Knox when he warned the Scottish nobility against the evil of amassing family wealth beyond the limits of the Pauline conception of the family need. For Knox insisted that spiritual education—all true education was to him spiritual—was the necessary guarantee against the abuse of God's gifts. For no legacy, he declared, would be more harmful than wealth bequeathed to an uneducated offspring.

This evangelical tradition still offers its unchallengeable solution of all our social and economic problems, because it is founded on revelation and is accordingly honouring to God and man. It has carried nations and peoples through many a crisis, and is fitted to do so still, with the assurance of the supremacy of Christ underneath it as everlasting arms. In our own time of travail let us then face our tribulations and their issue with the same unconquerable courage and confidence that Calvin showed before the King of France, and Knox manifested before a Scottish Monarch, and which have been recently expressed so boldly by Karl Barth in these words: "The final result of the whole affair I have never doubted, I do not doubt to-day, and I shall not doubt in the future."

D. MACLEAN.

*Edinburgh.*