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THE RETURN TO THE BIBLE ¹

D. MARTYN LLOYD-JONES

There is a growing concern among Christian leaders because of the thinness of so many congregations and the general unsatisfactory spiritual condition of the churches. What is the cause of it all? The War [i.e. World War I], and the spread of education, the improved social conditions, and the amelioration of the injustices in life, the motor-car, and the cinema, and the wireless — all these things which we mention so frequently as causes of the present condition of spiritual decline are, in my opinion, mere secondary causes, mere results and by-products of something else which is very much deeper and much more important: and it is to that some thing deeper that I would like to direct your attention this evening. For to me the real cause of the present state of the Church of God on earth is to be found in the Church's voluntary departure from a belief in the Bible as the fully inspired Word of God, and from stressing and emphasizing real evangelical truth.

From the moment that philosophy was given the place of revelation in our studies and in our pulpits, things really began to go wrong. Of course, for a time, people continued to attend church and chapel in fairly large numbers, partly out of mere habit and custom, without realizing exactly what was happening, but we can be perfectly certain that the Church lost her authority and power from the moment that she ceased to believe firmly in the authority of the Word of God, and

when she became doubtful and hesitant in her presentation of its doctrines to the people.

From the moment that the idea began to gain currency that the Bible was the history of the quest of mankind for God, rather than God's revelation of Himself and the only way of salvation to mankind, the Church began to decline and to wane in her influence and in her power. From the time the Church threw overboard the great evangelical doctrines, and substituted for them a belief in the moral and spiritual evolution of mankind, and began to preach a social gospel rather than a personal salvation — from that moment church attendance really became a mere matter of form, or a merely pleasant way of gratifying one's appetite for ceremony, ritual, oratory, and music. Church attendance was no longer absolutely essential and vital.

At that point I suggest to you that the rot set in, which has led to the painful and pathetic state of affairs with which we are face to face at this present moment. The greatest testimony, in a sense, that I know of to the truth and power of the Word of God is the present state of the Church of God on earth; and I make that statement not in any spirit of pessimism or hopelessness, but rather feeling that the present position augurs well, and that the present moment is auspicious.

I do believe that at long last we are coming to the end of the terrible spiritual winter through which we have been passing; I believe I discern the signs of an oncoming spring. On all hands I think there are indications which justify us in saying that there is a new interest in religion among the people, not merely in the Press and in the newspapers, but really in the minds and hearts of the people themselves.

At the same time I think it is correct and true to say also that there is a marked and very striking tendency at the moment for some of the most notable leaders of religion to turn back once more to the old positions and to the old standards. There again we have a situation which really merits our analysis. I have not time to analyze it as I should like to, but even in this brief moment I would ask you to bear with me while I suggest the real explanation of this present tendency to turn back to the old position.

In the case of the Church I do believe that the mere logic of facts is at least beginning to have its due weight. Men, observing empty churches and chapels, are at last beginning to see that organization and efforts which are merely human are not enough. Many leaders in the church are also turning back to the old position, because of their sheer

intellectual bewilderment and confusion as a result of the world of the so-called higher critics and the philosophers. There is an increasing demand at the present moment for what is called a “realistic theology,” and for a definite, certain, assured message for the people.

In the case of the people, this awakened interest in religion is, I think, to be traced, not merely to the economic depression through which we have been passing, and the stress and strain of circumstances. I think there is another reason also — namely that men and women are becoming heartily tired of this life of moral laxity and moral looseness to which a turning of one’s back upon the Bible almost inevitably and certainly leads. I believe this generation is realizing that Isaiah spoke nothing but the simple truth when he said: “There is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked” [Isaiah 57:21].

Surely, there is our opportunity. The people are waiting for something; they are asking for something; they are crying out for new authorities and new sanctions. The old self-satisfied, confident, flippant mood of the late Victorians and many others who since then have believed that science could prove and solve everything, has gone. The old cocksure attitude has vanished. Everything is uncertain. Men and women do not quite know where they stand, nor where to turn, and they are crying out for an authoritative word. They desire something certain that promises and offers to help them and to deliver them from the problems of life. If you feel tempted to dispute that statement, I would simply ask you to explain how it comes to pass that there are so many cults and false movements round about us at this present time. The need of the people at this moment is so deep and so great that they are prepared to listen to anybody or anything which offers a possible solution. Alas! it is because the church of God has been so uncertain of her message that the cults and the false, spurious movements have seen their opportunity and have taken it.

Still it is not too late. I believe that the position confronting us is still hopeful. There is much that we can do. There is much that we *must* do. The people are waiting. Do we discern the signs of the times? Are we ready with our answer? For my part, there is but one answer, and it is to repeat both in word and in the Spirit, what Paul said to those Stoics and Epicureans on Mars Hill in Athens so long ago: “Whom ye ignorantly worship, Him declare I unto you” [Acts 17:23]. I believe the great call to us at the moment is to declare the great central, eternal verities of the Word of God.

I believe the paramount and most urgent duty at the moment is not to defend the Bible, not to argue about the Bible — I believe we are called upon at the present moment to *declare* the Bible: to announce the eternal truths contained in the Bible. I would not be misunderstood in that remark and be interpreted as saying that I do not believe in the defence of the Bible. Actually, I think that the case for the defence of the Bible against its attackers is stronger at this present moment than it has ever been. I think we can safely leave the various schools of higher criticism to defeat and to demolish one another. Indeed, according to the latest and most radical German school of criticism, the old fundamental article in the faith of the higher critic, which was the distinction between the Synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of God, was an utterly false distinction.

I think we can now claim that higher criticism has turned a complete circle, and that we stand more or less exactly where we stood a hundred years ago before it began its evil and unfortunate course. Not only that, but the whole position of the critics at the present moment is one of utter confusion, and the counter-attack from the side of the philologist and archaeologist, yea, and even from the side of the philosopher, is literally overwhelming.

The Barthian School and its teaching, which is inadequate from the truly evangelical position, is more than sufficient to show the utter futility of the human reasoning and philosophizing, which has been placed in the position of revelation in the world of religion for the last hundred years. I say, therefore, that defence is exceedingly valuable, but the call comes to us to-day to go forward, to advance, and even to attack. I suggest that we are called upon to pronounce, to declare, and to state in no uncertain way the central verities and truths of the Bible, to proclaim that it is the full and final revelation of God's will for men and God's salvation for mankind. I believe we are called upon to bear this testimony in a very clear and definite manner.

What then are the truths of the Bible that we need to proclaim?

I believe we need to declare to this generation that first and all-important truth of regeneration and justification by faith only. I do not want to be controversial, but must we not admit and confess that there is far too much heard at the present time of the word "decision," as if the great thing is that you and I should decide for Christ, rather than that He should do something for us? Is there not a tendency to emphasize results at the expense of regeneration?

Let us face this question quite honestly. As I read of the work of the great evangelists in the Bible I find they were not first and foremost concerned about results; they were concerned about proclaiming the Word of Truth; they left the increase unto God. They were concerned, above all else, that the people should be brought face to face with the truth itself. I watch Paul going into the town of Corinth. He might have thought of many things in order to attract the people and to obtain results. But actually he does nothing of the sort. He says: "I determined not to know anything among you save Jesus Christ and Him crucified" [1 Corinthians 2:2].

The great apostle was afraid of rhetoric, of eloquence, of oratory. I think he was terrified lest a man might join his church simply because he had been carried away by Paul's own preaching. No, our business, our work, our first call is to declare in a certain and unequivocal manner the sovereignty, the majesty, and the holiness of God; the sinfulness and the utter depravity of man, and his total inability to save and to rescue himself; and the sacrificial, expiatory, atoning death of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, on that cross on Calvary's hill, and His glorious resurrection, as the only means and only hope of human salvation.

We must come back to that old position and declare the justice and righteousness of God as well as the love of God. We must emphasize once more the wrath of God as well as the mercy of God; and we must picture salvation, not merely as something that makes people feel happy and comfortable, but as the one and only means of saving them from hell and from the wrath of God and the punishment of sin. At any rate, as I read my Bible that is the only method of evangelization I find there, as it was the great and only evangelical method of the Protestant Reformers; as it was the great method of George Whitefield and John Wesley, and of all the great leaders of the Evangelical Awakening of the eighteenth century. May God, in His mercy and grace, deliver us from our present weakness and sentimentality, and grant unto us again boldness of utterance that we may convict and convert this sinful generation from the error of its ways. We need to go back and declare and testify again that central message of God's Word.

I believe we also need to go back and declare again in no uncertain terms the great biblical message with regard to sanctification also. And this is obviously a word primarily meant for the Church. There is nothing that so saddens me as to find the number of good Protestant people who seem to derive all teaching on sanctification and holiness

from the writings of certain Roman Catholic saints and mystics rather than from the Word of God itself. I refer to the tendency to exalt and propagate the ideas of quietism, passivity, and various forms of perfectionism.

There is a danger of our developing a sickly sentimentality, a pietism which really lacks power and strength. I am afraid many good people whom I know would be very doubtful about the holiness of a man like Paul, who could be vehement and sarcastic and say, "If any man preach any other gospel than that which we have preached, let him be accursed" [Galatians 1:9]. I doubt whether they would not say he was rather a nasty, unpleasant man, not quite nice enough to be really holy and sanctified. Such is the result of preaching repression in terms of surrender, instead of emphasizing the liberating power of the Holy Ghost and the cleansing power of the Spirit of God. Such is the result of emphasizing and stressing holiness and sanctification primarily as something that gives us release or happiness, or that gives us a fuller or happier life, instead of saying that men should give up sin, not that they may be happier, but because sin is sin, because sin is ugly, and foul, and utterly incongruous with everything that Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, came into this world in order to achieve. We must give up sin, not because it disturbs and troubles us, but because it is an outrage upon the nature of a holy God. The Bible in its teaching on sanctification starts with God and not with man. I think the call to us is to return to that position.

Then, lastly, I think that we need to declare also the biblical doctrine, not merely with regard to the salvation of the individual, but with regard to the salvation of the whole world. And here, I think, we have a very great opportunity at this present moment. We need to emphasize at such a time as this, biblical history, biblical cosmogony. We need to show that the Bible looks forward right to the end of all things, and sees the day coming when God's full purpose will have been entirely worked out. I think this is very important at this present time, because there is a tendency among some people to substitute a sentimental idealism, a mere humanism, for the real position of the Bible.

We need to tell this generation that the world will actually get worse and worse during this dispensation, and that there will be wars and rumours of wars, that evil men will multiply, and that the future course of this world is the very opposite and antithesis of that which is believed by our evolutionist friends. We need to face the fact of that central

doctrine which preaches, not the development of evolution, but an apocalypse, a return of the Son of God, no longer as a servant, but as the King and as Lord. We need to tell people about that last great judgement, when the sheep and goats shall be separated, and when Christ shall be all in all. We need to tell them that in spite of present appearances there is a day coming when

*Jesus shall reign where'er the sun
Doth his successive journeys run,
His kingdom stretch from shore to shore,
Till moons shall wax and wane no more.*

*Blessings abound where'er He reigns;
The prisoner leaps to loose his chains;
The weary find eternal rest;
And all the sons of want are blessed.*
[Isaac Watts]

There it seems to me, are the central doctrines and truths which we are called upon to declare to this present generation. Some of us will do it in pulpits and on platforms. You are not all called to do it in that way, but you are all called upon to “adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour” [Titus 2:10]. That is the doctrine. Let us by word and by look, by life and by song, by everything we do and everything we are, declare these unsearchable riches of Christ to all and sundry. God grant us the needed grace and strength to fulfil His will, for His Name’s sake. Amen. **E**

DR. D. MARTYN LLOYD-JONES was pastor of the Westminster Chapel, London, from 1938 to 1968.

ENDNOTES

¹ This address was given by Dr. Lloyd-Jones at the Bible Testimony Demonstration at the Royal Albert Hall, London. It was originally printed in *The Christian Herald* (London; for a brief history of this publication, see www.christian-herald.org.uk) and reprinted in *The Gospel Witness* of March 12, 1936. It has been copied from this issue of *The Gospel Witness* with slight editing of some of the punctuation and the addition of the references to Bible verses.

In many ways this address is quite interesting. When some evangelicals, for example, thought that the Barthian response to liberal theology was a welcome return to

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orthodox Christianity, Lloyd-Jones discerned that Barthianism was "inadequate from the truly evangelical position." Then again Lloyd-Jones recognized the problems associated with "decisionism" at a time when many evangelicals were content to use a method of evangelism at odds with biblical theology. And he was discerning that evangelical spirituality needed to be rooted in good biblical soil and not the soil of Roman Catholicism. All in all, if this address was applicable at the time when Lloyd-Jones gave it, its central thesis is even more applicable now.

It is noteworthy that Dr. T.T. Shields (1873-1955), who had had a now-famous meeting with Lloyd-Jones a few years earlier, commented at the head of *The Gospel Witness* reprint of the talk: "This address, specially reported for the "Christian Herald," aroused considerable interest among Christian people at the time of its delivery, and as some of the points have since given rise to discussion, the address will be of interest to readers, especially when it is remembered that Dr. Lloyd-Jones was a Harley-street doctor until a few years ago, when he gave up his practices to preach the Gospel, and he is to-day considered one of the outstanding preachers in Wales."