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Liberal Evangelicalism: What it is and What it stands for.¹

(*Concluding Article.*)

VI.—THE CHURCH AND THE NATION.

IT is said that Archbishop Tait was once asked by a somewhat anxious questioner what he thought concerning the crisis in the Church: to whom he replied that there always had been and always would be a crisis in the Church. This is quite true, and needs to be kept in mind constantly, to check pessimism.

The Church is a living society, and in every generation it is brought face to face with a new situation, which is the outcome in part of its environment—social, political, and religious—and in part of the spirit of the age. Consequently, each chapter in the history of the Church is the story of a crisis; if this were not so, it would mean either that the Church was not alive to its mission, or else that it had drifted into a backwater where it had become stranded from the stream of contemporary thought, and therefore could make no impact upon the life of the nation of that time.

The anxiety of the present-day situation is lest this calamity should befall the Christian Church in England; lest its energy should be devoted so entirely to internecine strife that it should go on treading the giddy circle of controversy until it becomes afflicted with a theological vertigo. It is this possibility which constitutes the real crisis in the Church to-day.

Is the opinion of the Church a controlling force in shaping the social policy of the Government? In all recent and proposed legislation for social betterment, is the influence and guidance of the Church recognized and deferred to? Does the Government ask, as the natural preliminary to drafting a Bill

[¹ It may be convenient to state that the CHURCHMAN is not necessarily identified with all the views set forth in this series of papers. They are contributed by one of the ablest writers amongst the younger Evangelicals who is entitled to be heard.—ED.]

to deal with social evils, what the National Church advises? Has the Church an opinion at all? Does it carry any weight?

Such questions as these reveal the real crisis at the present time. It is easy enough to paint the picture in exaggerated colours, and many have done so to the satisfaction of their vindictive feelings, or else to the gratification of their morbid fancies. But we wish to face the situation without either any exaggeration or mitigation of the facts. Liberal Evangelicals are seriously disquieted at the present position of the Church as a social force.

Let us look at recent happenings.

Take, for instance, the legislation for the suppression of the White Slave Traffic, the Bill to fetter the Licensed Trade, the National Insurance Act. In the first case the Church was in hearty sympathy, but it cannot be fairly said that the Act was in any direct sense the work of the Church; the part it took was to applaud loudly what others were doing. The Licensing Bill divided Church opinion, very largely, perhaps, upon the ethics of the problem of compensation—a very proper matter of dispute, no doubt. But all the same there was no insistent demand that the national curse must be drastically treated. As for the Insurance Act, the general attitude adopted in the Church was one of hope that the unpopularity of the measure would eject the Government before it could disestablish the Welsh Church.

Hyde Park demonstrations, imposing processions of Churchmen from the North and from the Midlands, are organized to defend Church Schools or the Welsh Church; but this sensational expression of the conscience of the Church is not manifested in the case of national evils or social injustices.

At the present grave crisis in the nation's history the same ineffectiveness of the Church is noticeable. An interdenominational body, the Y.M.C.A., has taken the lead in providing amusement and recreation for the troops under pure conditions; the call to total abstinence came from the King, and not from the Bishops. In the labour disputes, such as the Coal, Railway,

and Transport Strikes, the Church, as a Church, had nothing to say, or, at any rate, nothing which the parties concerned thought it worth while to listen to.

No doubt it may be urged with much truth that every ameliorating and elevating movement, every wise counsel, is the fruit of the age-long work of the Christian Church ; that, when the solution of problems and the pacifying of disputes have resulted, they are the work of Christian men. But this is clearly not enough. The Church, as the incarnation of the Life and Power of Christ, should be, and was designed to be, a solid mass of men and women who had drawn the sword against evil in every form, to wage incessant warfare against it till it was utterly destroyed. The Church ought to be the first to declare war against injustice, on the lookout for sin in every form, insistently sounding the call to arms at the first sight of a national wrong, and issuing *commands* which no Christian Government would dare to set at naught.

The absence of this godly aggressiveness is simple. It is because the energy of the Church is devoted to other matters—matters which are secondary, matters which, when placed in the primary place, discredit the Church in public estimation.

We are not suggesting that it is out of place for the Church to defend itself and to protect its interests. This is a clear duty up to a certain point. But it seems that the thunder of the Church's indignation is reserved only for the occasions when those interests are menaced. What, however, is more distressing still is the thought that the attack upon the Church comes from Christian brethren. If it is a scandalous thing that our heavy artillery is used only to protect our possessions, it is far more scandalous and far more destructive of the influence of the Christian Churches in the land that we should have to defend ourselves against such an attack from such a quarter. If the Church devotes too much time and attention to guarding its interests, this is bad ; but since Nonconformity devotes some of its time to attacking the Church, this is ten times worse. If we are engaged in defending our endowments and our schools

(not to mention our differences with our fellow-Churchmen), and Nonconformity is employed in fighting for "justice for Wales," and protecting the working-class children from the hideous wrong of being taught the Catechism, if their parents are not unwilling, it is not surprising if the voice of the Christian Church is not heard in the national councils. It never rises above a confused murmur, and therefore the nation has not the faintest idea what line of conduct it would prescribe.

But it may be objected at once: This social campaign, this attempt to make the Church a political force, is an error; it is simply a recrudescence of the claim for temporal power. The Church's duty is to preach the Gospel to dying men and to build up the faithful in holy living.

This last is quite true, but it is a mistake to suggest that the Gospel message is merely that of the revival mission. Let it never be forgotten that the text of the first Gospel sermon set forth the programme of the Great Deliverer: He had come "to preach good tidings to the poor . . . to proclaim release to the captives . . . to set at liberty them that are bruised." To prepare the way of the Lord, to lay low the mountains and hills, to make straight a highway for our God—these things are part of the Gospel message.

No well-instructed Evangelical needs to be told what our fathers did long ago: they were men who recognized fully their social obligations, and they discharged them nobly. But many of us are so oppressed by the fear of preaching politics that we are in danger of culpably neglecting part of our message.

It is quite certain that the conditions of life under which the poor groan are such as to make the appeal to the religious instinct quite ineffective. Upon such questions as the housing of the poor, sweating, the drink problem, horse-racing, the betting ring, the living wage, etc., the Church should speak out. These curses are tangled undergrowth upon the highway of the Lord, and the coming of the kingdom is delayed, and will be delayed, till the Church goes forth to hew it down.

Germany desires world empire; it is a wrong desire, and

by God's mercy it will never be attained. But Germany was right in this : the only way to attain that misguided end was for every man to be a soldier, and for the nation to be prepared at every point. The Christian Church is called by Christ to world empire, and if the kingdoms of the world are to become the kingdoms of Christ it can only be by a religious militarism, a spiritual conscription. The Christian Church should be a force which social evils would never dare challenge. We sing confidently :

“ At the sign of triumph Satan's host doth flee.”

But it does nothing of the kind. It goes on its way, and will do so until we awaken to our plain duty.

It is not, of course, our own Church only which has failed so sadly in these directions—the non-Episcopal Churches are equally ineffective. This consideration leads us to suspect that the general failure of the Christian Churches is due to division and the mutual suspicion and jealousy which are the inevitable outcome of competition. Nonconformity has not hesitated to indulge in a political campaign, but, as we have already remarked, its energies have been directed against such “ evils ” as Establishment, and such “ injustices ” as the education of the children in the religion of their parents at the public expense. The Church has entered the arena of politics to defend itself in these particulars. So long as the activities of both parties are devoted to these objects, nothing in the way of a common and united campaign for social betterment can be achieved, and the impact of the Christian Church against the curses of the day will remain negligible.

It is the fashion to deplore these “ unhappy divisions,” and the familiar Episcopal speech at an interdenominational gathering generally contains some kindly reference to the worth of the non-Episcopal Churches and the expression of a pious and vague hope for brighter days. The formalities which precede the Church Congresses are always decorated with these worn platitudes. We know these speeches off by heart ; we

have heard them so often, and they are becoming rather nauseous. They all end in words, and nothing more. Lambeth Conferences have recommended that attempts should be made towards a better understanding with Nonconformity and its position, by Churchmen holding united conferences: practically nothing has been done. So inactive have the authorities been that one begins to feel that the kindly words spoken on the occasions referred to were not really meant at all.

Nothing is to be gained in attempting to fix the chief blame for religious dissensions at home. Nonconformity is greatly at fault, and so is the Church. It is the responsibility of the latter which chiefly concerns us.

Recently there occurred in British East Africa an incident which made the hearts of all those who have seen the larger vision beat with hope: we refer to the Kikuyu incident. It is unnecessary to dwell upon the details of the conference. The maladroit behaviour of the Bishop of Zanzibar, on the one hand, was enough to wreck the best cause in the world; on the other hand, the striking unanimity of lay opinion in favour of inter-communion was a revelation. But even this strong combination could not win a complete victory for tolerance and unity. At present the authorities incline to discountenance the Kikuyu proposals; some clergy are already threatening secession because the Archbishop of Canterbury is of the opinion that under certain circumstances non-Episcopalians might be admitted to Communion in our churches. The Bishop of Oxford declares that the modest concessions of the Archbishop are causing "serious disquiet of mind to many people," and promises to explain "later on" why he is unable to agree with his rulings.

It is therefore no wonder that organized Christianity is ineffective in guiding the nation, when certain Churchmen consider it a serious matter of principle to allow Nonconformists to communicate in their parish churches. Such narrow-mindedness at this time of day is enough to make angels weep. The end of it all is not difficult to see: unless a broader and more

tolerant spirit is exhibited, the Church will be deprived of its splendid title of "the Church of England," and sent to eat locusts and wild-honey in the wilderness.

Christian unity is what we need and what we must have before the Churches will be able really to advance that national righteousness which exalteth a nation. We are quite alive to the magnitude of the problem. We know that there are other Churches besides the non-Episcopal which must be included in the final plan. But charity begins at home, and our first and most imperative duty is to compose our domestic differences; and the way towards this is mutual respect and mutual regard, and a determination to join hands and forces to solve the social problems which are crying out for treatment.

If action is to be postponed till we compose all our differences, it will never take place in the lifetime of the present generations. But is it not possible to formulate a non-controversial programme of social improvement, to declare a holy war against evils which are outside the area of sectarian passions? The most rigid Episcopalian, who would not tolerate a Dissenter joining in Communion with him, would not hesitate to join with him in united attack upon the slums and rookeries upon which unscrupulous landlords "swell with fatness"; and the most stiff Nonconformist, who nearly bursts with indignation at the iniquity of a "State Church," would surely not refuse to join hands with the clergy of the Establishment to check and suppress the drink traffic and the betting trade.

These things are crying out for drastic treatment upon the line of Christian ethics, but the voices of the vested interests prevail against the fitful protests of the Christian Churches, and will continue to prevail until the forces of Christianity can operate upon some concerted plan and speak in harmony.

Liberal Evangelicalism, in a word, looks farther than the parish, and farther even than the interests of the Church of England. Its ideals are not bounded by the vision of a full church, a long communicants' roll, and deep interest in Foreign Missions. It sees that the progress of national religion is

hindered at every turn by flagrant evil and scandalous wrong, and it longs to see the Christian Church rise in its might, with the sword of the Lord in its hand, to slay the foul brood, sparing neither infant nor suckling, old man nor him that stoops for age.

The Christian Church in England has need of a vision, not so much of a new heaven, as of a new earth. May God open our eyes that we may see !

X.

