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**THE OXFORD CONFERENCE OF  
EVANGELICAL CHURCHMEN, 1939**  
(In continuation of the Cheltenham Conference)

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MARCH 27TH, 28TH AND 29TH, 1939.

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**General Subject :**  
**“SPIRITUAL REARMAMENT.”**

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**A BIBLE STUDY OF EZRA AND  
NEHEMIAH.**

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**OPENING ADDRESS**

by the REV. C. M. CHAVASSE, M.C., M.A., *Master of St. Peter's Hall,  
Oxford.*

**Y**OU may have noticed that the general subject of this Conference is not Moral Rearmament, but Spiritual Rearmament. Though the expression Moral Rearmament may be understood to imply that the chief security of a nation lies in producing better citizens—“ hearts of oak are our ships, hearts of oak are our men,” yet the slogan (which the anxieties of last summer brought into being) is meaningless unless it signifies Spiritual Rearmament. Morale depends upon religion. To try and engineer any kind of moral rearmament apart from religion, is as foolish as to build a factory for the manufacture of synthetic apples, instead of planting and tending an orchard. Moral Rearmament is the fruit of Spiritual Rearmament. It is not, therefore, surprising that the call to Moral Rearmament, though received with universal approbation, achieved no result. What is more disturbing is the like failure of the Recall to Religion, two years ago : for that movement, inspired by the Coronation, might rightly be described as a Call to Spiritual Rearmament. When we search for the reason, I think our experience will have taught us that for Spiritual Rearmament there are two essentials. The first is the *incentive* to rearm. The second is to know *how* to rearm.

The former essential arrived last September. Thenceforth a great gravity has settled upon the nation. It is comparable to that seriousness which transformed Georgian England at the time of the French

Revolution, and thus opened the door of every section of society to the influence of the Evangelical Revival. As Mr. R. K. Ensor has put it (in his book, *England 1870-1914*): "Nothing is more remarkable than the way in which evangelicalism in the broader sense overleaped sectarian barriers and pervaded men of all creeds," so that (as he affirms) "No one will ever understand Victorian England who does not appreciate that among highly civilized . . . countries it was one of the most religious that the world has known." The change, indeed, from Georgian to Victorian England was so profound that it seems incredible. Here was a spiritual and a moral rearmament with a vengeance! So much so that Lecky, a purely secular witness, believed that it was the new-found religion of the nation which enabled it to survive, first the sacrifices of the Napoleonic wars, and then the even graver perplexities of the Industrial Revolution. And Gladstone gave the reason. He used to repeat how he had heard Archbishop Howley, and other eminent men of the period, ascribe the reviving seriousness of the upper classes (so evident at the turn of the century) to their reaction against atrocity and atheism on the Continent.

We are confronted with a like European situation to-day; and the incentive to Spiritual Rearmament is even more urgent than in the days of our grandfathers. But there is one vital difference. With us there has been no previous revival of religion which can pour its invigorating forces into the channels thus opened up by national crisis. We have first to manufacture the spiritual armour, before we call upon our fellows to wear it. Thus, when through her Primate, the Church on January 1st, 1937, recalled the people to religion, their reply was, "Why come to Church when the Church has nothing to give us?"

This brings me to the other essential of Spiritual Rearmament namely, the knowledge *how* to rearm. We call people to return to religion, but do we tell them what to do? And are we quite clear, ourselves, as to what is involved?

It is the purpose of this Conference to find the answers to such questions. In order, therefore, to make clear the principles that underlie the choice and order of the subjects to be discussed, I propose to devote this introductory address to an examination of the development of Jewish national reconstruction as set forth in Ezra and Nehemiah; in the books of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah; and also in the last four chapters of Isaiah. "For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that through patience and through comfort of the Scriptures we might have hope."

It seems to me that from a study of the primary success and the ultimate failure of Jewish national reconstruction after the Babylonian Captivity, four principles emerge which we dare not neglect if England is to stand forth to-day as the Servant of the Lord, spiritually rearmed, to fulfil God's purpose in the world. They are, first *the re-establishment of God* at the centre of national life. Secondly, *the re-establishment of Christian standards* in all social relationships. Thirdly, the sense of *Individual Responsibility* towards God. And lastly, the *Missionary urge of Fellowship* towards man.

I. *First and foremost, there is the need to re-establish God at the centre of national life* (Ezra i.-vi. ; Haggai and Zechariah). Two thousand four hundred and seventy-six years ago (in 537 B.C.), Prince Zerubbabel and a first band of over 40,000 exiles, returned to Jerusalem with the express purpose (as ordered by Cyrus) of rebuilding the Temple. Within a year the Great Altar of Burnt Offering was set up, and the foundations of the Temple were laid. Immediately upon this, also, the full round of sacrifices and feasts were restored, beginning with the Feast of Tabernacles—that great annual commemoration of God's guidance of Israel through the Wilderness to the Promised Land. In twenty years, despite opposition, and encouraged by the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, the House of God was rebuilt, and the national worship fully re-established. And that event (in 516 B.C.), was considered as terminating the Babylonian exile, which was thus reckoned as seventy years' duration. For the Temple represented the Presence of God with His people, inspiring and directing their national life ; and to the Jew there could be no national life apart from God. Then notice that before it is possible to re-establish God in the heart of the nation there are two requirements : Repentance—we must know ourselves, and also Hope—we must know God. As we have seen, these two elements in a return from exile to God were symbolized, in the story of Jewish National Reconstruction, by the setting up of the Altar of Burnt Offering, and the keeping of the Feast of Tabernacles. This same need for Repentance and Hope was recognized during the War, and gave the name to the Mission that was then attempted. But the war days were so full of tension and action, that the idea of the Mission became rather a matter of doing something of a religious character, than of a nation humbly waiting in quiet upon God. The same difficulty attends our efforts for religious revival in these days of screaming newspaper placards, and of so-called B.B.C. scare-mongering. The country is ready enough to fill churches and cathedrals to implore the aid of Almighty God in times of national crisis. But is this sufficient ? I could not help wondering what Isaiah would have said if he had stood at the entrance to Westminster Abbey last September. We do know, however, what he called to the panic-stricken crowds that “trampled” the courts of the Temple, when the fierce hordes, either of Syria or Assyria, were swarming up the hills to the capital, and the gates of Jerusalem were choked with refugees. He denounced their Intercession Services as hypocrisy and futility. “To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me ? saith the Lord . . . I am weary to bear them. And when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you ; yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear” (Isa. i. 11-15). For, as Sir George Adam Smith remarks, when commenting on this passage, “History has many remarkable instances of peoples betaking themselves in the hour of calamity to the energetic discharge of the public rites of religion. But such a resort is seldom, if ever, a real moral conversion. It is merely physical nervousness, apprehension for life, clutching at the one thing within reach that feels solid, which it abandons as soon as panic has passed.” As the prophet insists, recourse to God must be accompanied by a real change of heart,

if it is to be effective. To seek God's Presence for refuge, must also mean to walk in the light of that Presence in daily life. To the extent that no real change of heart is discernible in the nation since the September crisis : to that extent the resort to prayer which it occasioned was valueless and rather shameful. And now, six months later, I would deprecate any easy summons to organized Intercession. I see no other course save to begin with a Day of National Humiliation and Repentance. Then, and not till then, may we go forward to Hope in the God Who has led this people so wondrously in the past. It is no light matter to re-establish God in the centre of national life ; and yet an England on its knees is a blasphemous spectacle *unless we do*.

II. *The second principle for Spiritual Rearmament thus follows from the first—namely—the re-establishment of Christian standards in all Social Relationships* (Ezra vii.-x. ; Nehemiah viii.-xiii.). Fifty-eight years after the dedication of the Temple, Ezra, the Scribe, appeared in Jerusalem with a second band of returned exiles (in 458 B.C.). His work was to make effective in the life of the growing community the Law of God as set forth in the Book of Deuteronomy. His reforms (as outlined in Nehemiah x.) were principally four in number. First, to abolish inter-marriage with foreigners ; in order to preserve the pure worship of God in the home, and safeguard it from the decadent immoralities of Nature Worship. Secondly, to observe the Sabbath. Thirdly to give alms for the work and worship of Almighty God. And fourthly, not to forsake the House of God. God-fearing homes ! Sunday Observance ! The stewardship of money ! And Public Worship ! Are these bulwarks and expressions of true religion wanting, or in danger, in our twentieth-century civilization ? Certainly they were characteristic features of Victorian England, as influenced by the Evangelical Revival. I doubt if they can now be adequately restored save in the heat of another revival. But do we sufficiently impress their importance upon the members of our congregation, or upon candidates for Confirmation ?

Boys and girls are increasingly entering the wider world from pagan homes, or no homes at all ; and from Secondary Schools where religious teaching, in many cases, either hardly exists, or else had better have been non-existent. As Professor Joad has recently pointed out in the pages of the *Spectator* : " Of those who come to maturity to-day, the vast majority make no contact with organized religion ; so far as they are concerned, it might never have existed." Yet multitudes of them are immensely attracted when at last they hear the Gospel, and fall beneath the spell of the " Young Prince of Glory." But, after that, they receive little teaching or training in the discipline of the Christian profession. One of the chief needs of our day is to re-think what true discipleship demands in the way of corporate conduct and practice ; and then to lay its Cross upon Christ's followers, as straitly as did the Apostles upon their converts. Meanwhile the Church itself has sore need of a far higher standard of religious behaviour, seeing that it finds itself engulfed in what is rapidly becoming pagan society. Growing materialism is lowering and softening the vitality and fibre of

Christian living. And yet it is only a Church which lives right above the world, that can lift and influence the world. Our times, just because they are evil, call for a tightening up, not a relaxation, of standards.

III. *This leads on to the third principle for Spiritual Rearmament, Individual Responsibility towards God* (Nehemiah i.-vii.). A return to God and His standards of life can never, in the first instance, be a national movement ; and it is folly to wait for, or to try and organize such a movement. The Spirit of God moves as He will, and is not controlled by committees or the resolutions of Conferences. The way to revival is the personal method (adopted by Christ Himself) of enlisting and inspiring individuals each to do their share. So it was, by such personal means, that the walls of Jerusalem were at last rebuilt.

Ezra's zeal was of the narrow, dominating, and fanatical kind. Especially did his ruthless expulsion of all foreign wives, together with their children, arouse dissension in Jerusalem itself and fierce animosity among the neighbouring peoples. The result was that his attempt to rebuild the walls was abortive (Ezra. iv. 8 ff.). Nothing was accomplished till the arrival of Nehemiah with a third band of captives thirteen years later. Then, what the returned exiles had tried in vain to accomplish for nearly a century, Nehemiah carried through in fifty-two days. How did he achieve the superhuman task, and rebuild three miles of ruined wall in less than two months? His infectious enthusiasm worked the miracle. So did he inspire all to bear their part, and each to undertake that piece of work that lay nearest to his hand. Thus the Priests and Levites repaired the wall over against the Temple and their own quarters. They were the first to volunteer ; and the country to-day is waiting for a lead from the clergy themselves. The merchants undertook the north-western angle of the wall, adjoining their bazaars. Religion can only enter office, factory, and shop, when it is introduced by those who spend their lives in them. Neighbouring villages rebuilt the stretches of wall that lay nearest to them. If his own neighbourhood does not offer God's servant full scope for his powers, then he should lend his aid to the nearest cause or place that calls for assistance. Residents made themselves responsible for the piece of wall opposite their dwellings—even Meshullam a lodger, repaired the wall "over against his chamber" (Neh. iii. 30). Our families and our friends must always be a first charge upon our zeal for God.

Finally, all the builders carried weapons at their side ; and half of Nehemiah's servants always stood to arms. Our weapon is prayer, a force that must always be mobilized in religious reconstruction : even as Bunyan specially marked the weapon of "All Prayer" in St. Paul's description of Spiritual Rearmament (Eph. vi. 18). Are we, do you think, expending too much of our energy in organizing and in setting up Councils of Action, instead of concentrating upon individuals? If only the present members of our congregations were enthused and instructed for service, the City of God would be rebuilt as speedily as Nehemiah accomplished the impossible—a matter of months instead of a century. All down the ages of Christendom it has been *men* who have personally advanced the Kingdom of Heaven. And when the

men have developed into movements, they have become rather a nuisance.

IV. *But finally to what end is our Spiritual Rearmament? It must be the Missionary urge of Universal Fellowship*, or all our efforts are foredoomed to failure (Ezra iv. ; Isaiah lxiii. 7—lxvi.). We must seek to re-establish God in the centre of national life, and to rebuild English Society on Christian principles—not for any “Little-England” satisfaction, or to strengthen our own particular branch of the Church ; but, in order that our Country may become a Servant of God, ministering to the needs of the whole world.

This was a truth which the Jews refused to heed, when it was proclaimed by their greater prophets ; and their disobedience explains the poignant tragedy of their failure and dispersion. The Samaritans, the remnants of the Northern Kingdom, had in general remained faithful to the worship of the One True God, and had even influenced the faith of the alien races which had been settled in their midst (2 Kings xvii. 28 ff.). They had been deeply affected by the preaching of Amos, and the reformation under King Josiah ; and when Jerusalem was finally destroyed, a pilgrimage of eighty Samaritans came to mourn and make their offerings in the ruined Temple (Jer. xli. 5). Naturally, therefore, when half a century later a start was made rebuilding the Temple, the Samaritans came forward offering their services. But they were scornfully repulsed as “Adversaries” ; and adversaries therefore they became. They opposed the rebuilding of the Temple, and hindered the repair of the city walls. A racial feud was thus begun which had assumed terrible proportions in Our Lord’s day. Even as He talked with the Woman of Samaria He could see on Mount Gerizim the ruins of the Samaritan Temple to Jehovah built some time at the end of Nehemiah’s governorship, and destroyed by John Hyrcanus some three hundred years later, about 129 B.C. Indeed, the rebuff has not yet been forgotten. Only the other day Mr. E. V. Morton (as he relates in his book *In the Steps of the Master*) listened to the present Samaritan High Priest vigorously declaiming against some building operations in Jerusalem. He discovered to his astonishment that the work referred to was the rebuilding of the Temple by Zerubbabel, 2,500 years ago. The same fatal exclusiveness next appears in Ezra’s re-establishment of the Law. The kings of Persia were followers of Zoroaster, and were therefore most favourably inclined to the pure monotheism of the Jews. Thus Artaxerxes commissioned Ezra to extend obedience to the Law throughout the whole of Syria (Ezra vii. 25, 26). But no ! the Law, to Ezra’s mind, was the privilege of the Jews alone and extended no further. To crown all, Ezra’s inhuman ruthlessness (Ezra x.), and Nehemiah’s surprising violence (Nehemiah xiii. 23 ff.), with regard to alien wives and their children, can only be explained by that same racial prejudice which is recoiling so terribly on Jewish heads to-day.

The Law itself did not authorize the wholesale expulsion which Ezra and Nehemiah decreed. Its commands regarding foreign alliances are confusing and contradictory : neither did these two good men pause to remember the alien wives of the Lawgiver, Moses himself,

or that David was descended from Rahab the Canaanite and Ruth the Moabitess—both of whom figure in St. Matthew's genealogy of the Messiah. The result of this fatal policy of exclusion and privilege is written large upon Israel's subsequent history. Thereby, Jewish religion became a matter of ritual rather than of worship; and of negative and petty observance rather than a life of love. So was it that the restored nation crucified its expected Messiah, and the rebuilt Temple and City were destroyed. And yet the Jews meant so well, and toiled and suffered so nobly! We should read and ponder the last four chapters of Isaiah. There, the prophet who had foretold the return from exile expostulates most movingly against this fatal outlook, and particularly against the wrong done to the Samaritans. In chapters lxiii. and lxiv., he voices the pathetic plaint of the rejected Samaritans, who were still Jehovah's children, "though Abraham knoweth us not, and Israel doth not acknowledge us" (Isa. lxiii. 16). Indeed, the whole passage is most difficult of interpretation apart from such an explanation. And then in chapters lxv. and lxvi., the prophet paints his glorious vision of Jerusalem as the centre of a unified world. Above all things, then, in spiritual rearmament and national religious reconstruction, we are bound to be missionary-hearted, and widely inclusive in our practical policy. We can never build the City of God, or enthrone Christ in the hearts of the people, without the closest union with other Churches who are willing to unite with us. As the recent Madras Conference showed, the younger Churches of India, China, and Africa, encompassed as they are with the crushing forces of paganism, recognize that they cannot make free headway as long as they are hobbled by the denominational differences with which the older Churches have fettered them. Neither can we hope at home to win the masses for Christ, until there exists a Church which is the Church of England in fact, as well as in name and by tradition.

If the severed Churches of our land, all worshipping the One All Father, continue to regard each other as "adversaries" instead of Brothers in Christ, then (as with Israel of old) the Writing is already on the Walls that we seek to rebuild.

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*Some Gospel Scenes and Characters* is one of Canon Peter Green's studies of the New Testament (Longmans, Green & Co., 3s. 6d. net), but it is on somewhat unusual lines as he allows his imagination to play upon the actual facts that are recorded. In this way he deals with the pierced heart of the Virgin Mary. He gives an account of the visit of the Magi as the first fruits of the Gentiles. He explains the character of four disciples. St. Matthew as the scribe of the words of Christ, St. Mark as the coward who waxed valiant in the fight, St. Luke as the beloved physician, and St. John as the disciple whom Jesus loved. In an account of the events of the first Easter Day he denies that the various accounts of the Resurrection cannot be reconciled and shows how it may be done. These chapters show Canon Green to be a close and ardent student of the New Testament, and many will find useful hints in his suggestive studies.