

EVANGELICALISM AND THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT.

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IT is the teaching of history that religion, wherever it is a vital thing, is sure to change and develop, to assume new forms and to take on fresh directions, with the passage of time. The impulse of life will never suffer it to become fixed or to remain stationary, but keeps it ever plastic, and moulds it into ever-changing shapes.

Those who speak as though it were a reproach to us that our views and our outlook to-day do not precisely coincide with those of our forefathers are forgetful of this universal law. That the history of Evangelicalism should be marked by continuity, and that there should be in it no break with the past or disavowal of our heritage, is a demand which is both reasonable and right. And it is a legitimate claim which is made on behalf of the older Evangelicalism, when it is contended that it has a contribution of value to make to the newer, inasmuch as there are aspects of truth, which were more clearly perceived, and more deeply felt, by its leaders than they are by the younger generation of to-day. But, when it is asserted or implied that the older Evangelicalism was so perfect a thing that it cannot be improved or developed in any direction, and that our only wisdom is to uphold, without modification of any kind, the theology of our forefathers, then we are bound profoundly to differ. However sincere and well-intentioned those may be who hold such views—that many of them are so to a pre-eminent degree we do not doubt—they do no true service, as we believe, to the cause of religion in taking up such a position. For it is a universal law of the spiritual world that the corollary of life is plasticity and development, and that fixity and immobility are tokens of spiritual death. To demand, therefore, of any body of doctrines that they shall remain absolutely fixed and unchanging is to encourage the spiritual deadness which alone renders such rigidity possible.

It is the conviction of the writer that the present weakness of

Evangelicalism is due, not so much to the fact that our views have suffered some modification from those of the orthodoxy of the past, as to the lack of sufficient development in our theology. And it is his aim, in what follows, to indicate one direction in which, in his belief, development is greatly needed.

Looking broadly at our theology, it can be seen that, speaking generally, it has laid greater stress on doctrines which relate to justification by faith and what precedes and prepares for it, than upon teaching as to what should follow it in the converted life. We have insisted with great emphasis upon Original Sin and the necessity of Regeneration, and we have exalted the atoning Death of Christ and proclaimed the Pauline teaching on justification through belief in the saving efficacy of that death. We have also had much to say on the subject of Conversion. Everything, in fact, in the individual's spiritual history up to the point where he is brought face to face with the Cross, and yields his utter allegiance to Christ as his personal Saviour from sin and its consequences, we have nobly and unswervingly proclaimed. But, when that point has been reached, we have tended to regard our work as mainly done. Not that we have had nothing more to say. We have preached the Holy Spirit, the need of sanctification, and the power of the ascended Christ. We have also insisted on the need of growth in holiness, and of the absolute necessity of prayer. We have not omitted to teach the Holy Communion as a means of grace. Yet, speaking generally, we have not proclaimed these things with the earnestness with which we have insisted on those others. We have filled up our teaching with them, but it is the former that have formed the backbone of our message. We have been more at home in the Pauline theology than in the Johannine; and, within the Pauline theology, we have been more at home in the teaching which centres in justification by faith than in that which centres in spiritual union with Christ by the Holy Spirit. If the reader does not agree, we would beg him—bearing in mind the fact that, when our attention is being constantly directed towards certain texts, they are apt to assume in our minds a disproportionate degree of importance—to seek to forget all the Protestant theology he has ever read, and to read the New Testament afresh, laying aside all preconceptions and prejudices, and endeavouring honestly to weigh the relative importance and promi-

nence of each aspect of the teaching which is there presented. If he, then, brings into comparison with his unbiased estimate of the teaching of the New Testament the usual Protestant presentation of Scripture truth, we believe that he will not fail to perceive the difference of emphasis to which we have referred.

If this difference is a fact, it surely constitutes a defect in our teaching. We have no right to exalt one aspect of Scripture doctrine and to neglect another, out of mere predilection. We ought to be quite impartial. The explanation of our onesidedness is no doubt not far to seek. It has a historical origin, and is due to controversial exigencies in the past. The doctrines on which we lay most stress to-day are those on whose behalf our forefathers had to contend. It may be that, in the atmosphere of heat and strife, it was impossible for those doctrines about which there was no controversy to receive as much attention as they deserved. But, even so, it does not follow that the onesidedness of the past must persist to all time. We believe that the time has fully come for it to be remedied, not by any weakening of emphasis on the great doctrines of our traditional theology, but by a strengthening of the stress laid upon those other doctrines to which we have referred. Our Evangelical theology to-day ought, we submit, to be a faithful and impartial reflection of the entire body of Scripture truth.

The deeper study of the New Testament only serves to strengthen our sense of the importance of those aspects of doctrine which have, in the past, suffered a comparative neglect in our theology. It is clear, on the one hand, that much of the Scripture teaching on justification breathes the atmosphere of controversy. It was St. Paul's contention with the Judaizers which led him to stress and emphasize the doctrine in the manner in which he did. Not that, apart from all controversy, it was not a most vital and fundamental belief of the Apostle, and would not have appeared as such in his letters. It is evident, from what he says, that the doctrine was for him a most sacred and cherished belief, inasmuch as it had brought him the peace and assurance of acceptance with God which his Pharisaism, for all its strictness, had utterly failed to impart. With such a personal experience behind him, he must under any circumstances have earnestly proclaimed the doctrine in his preaching and teaching. But, apart from the atmosphere of controversy, the teaching might have been given in a rather

different way, and the stress laid upon it might not have been such as we have in the Epistles to the Romans and Galatians. It is but reasonable to think that the stress of controversy has made at least some difference in the presentation of the doctrine. On the other hand, the teaching of the mystical union with Christ bears no marks of controversy. There is no evidence that it was disputed or denied. Had it been otherwise, it is probable that it would have been set forth with greater emphasis, and in a more dogmatic way.

Reading between the lines of the New Testament, it is plain that this spiritual union was an intense reality to the Apostles, and to many of their converts. We have some wonderful statements of it—so wonderful that many a Christian preacher has shrunk from expounding texts which describe experiences so far exceeding anything to which he has himself attained—but it is not only articulately stated; it is also instinctively felt to be ever-present in the background. To St. Paul's own inward life we have only brief references, scattered here and there in his writings and in the Acts; but they are enough to show that, after his conversion, he passed through a wonderful course of spiritual experience. And it is plain that it was this inward life of his which was the secret of, and the driving force behind, his extraordinary outward activities.¹ But even St. Paul's Spirit-filled life, wonderful as it was, pales before that of our Lord Himself. And can we rightly assert that in this, His inner relation to God, Christ stands wholly apart from ourselves? Is it not rather the truth that here, as in all else, He has bequeathed us a perfect example, that we might, so far as in us lies, follow in His steps?

What, then, we plead for is, in the first place, that all the Scriptural teaching upon the further Christian life and experience following upon conversion and justification should come to its own in our theology, and receive in our teaching that measure of stress and emphasis which is its due; that we should insist upon the great law of growth, and point to the complete transformation of the individual into the image of Christ by the working within him of the Holy Spirit as the goal of the Christian life in this present world; and that we should follow in the footsteps of Handley Moule

¹ There is an instructive treatment of St. Paul's inward history in Evelyn Underhill's *The Mystic Way*, c. 3.

and others in teaching that that most pregnant phrase, *in Christ*, leads us on into things of which the Sacred Atonement is but the holy threshold, or rather the foundation, while they are the temple built upon it. Such a development of our theology would be in complete harmony with our whole Evangelical position. If it is in the nature of Anglo-Catholicism to magnify tradition, and in the nature of liberal Churchmanship to exalt the intellect, it is in accord with the genius of Evangelicalism—with its stress on the individual's personal relation to God and on the possibility of the soul's immediate access to Him—to magnify the religious experience, in all its forms and stages.

Secondly, we plead for a much fuller use of the writings of the great masters of the spiritual life of all Creeds, as interpreters of the Scripture teaching. These have not, indeed, had experiences which transcend those of which the New Testament speaks. No human experience could transcend those to which St. Paul testifies when he says, "I have been crucified with Christ; yet I live; and yet no longer I, but Christ liveth in me" (Gal. ii. 20); or, "I know a man in Christ . . . caught up even to the third heaven . . . how that he was caught up into Paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter" (2 Cor. xii. 2-4). But these experiences are referred to in the tersest manner; there is no detailed account of them, or of the process by which they were attained. It was reserved for the piety of later generations to fill in the details, to develop and expound all the wealth of significance which these pregnant utterances enshrine, and to delineate the course of the pathway which issues in a full spiritual union with our Lord. When we compare these writings with one another, we can see that there is a certain normal course of spiritual progress, and we are able to construct a chart, as it were, of the soul's upward journey as it advances in accordance with St. Paul's teaching, when he says, "We all, with unveiled face reflecting as a mirror the glory of the Lord, are transformed into the same image from glory to glory, even as from the Lord the Spirit" (2 Cor. iii. 18). We learn, e.g., that the pathway lies through dark valleys as well as up clear and shining heights, and that the pilgrim may expect to encounter the "dark night of the soul" as well as to enjoy the blissful sense of immediate contact with God, possibly accompanied by ecstasy or rapture. All this, and much more that is to be found

in these writings, is of real use to every sincere and aspiring Christian. It provides him with salutary encouragements and warnings, and gives him an insight into what he may expect to experience. It may save him alike from despair and from overweening pride. It gives him a just view of himself, as but a humble follower in the footsteps which have been trodden by far greater souls ; and, on the other hand, it shows him that experiences which he might otherwise have regarded as unique and peculiar to himself, are far from being such, inasmuch as they have been shared by many who have gone before him. It also affords him much valuable counsel as to the way of progress, and the means which great souls have found to be conducive to advance. Here are men and women who have attained, in an extraordinary degree, to the experiences of spiritual union with our Lord, as the Apostles speak of it, telling us in full detail the history of their inner lives. Surely their writings are deserving of greater attention than we have bestowed upon them in the past. We reverence, and with good reason, that wonderful book, Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. But it is only one of a host of masterpieces on the spiritual life, all of which are accounts of the soul's progress in its Godward journey, and have something to contribute in elucidation of the New Testament.

Thirdly, we plead for a serious study of the whole subject of religious experience. It is a study of great difficulty and complexity, and of vast importance. It is a study which is being keenly pursued by many minds to-day, and is destined to be more vigorously prosecuted in the future. It is a study from which, we submit, we ought not to hold aloof, but in which we should strive to play an honourable part. It is greatly in the interests of religion that the lead in that study should not fall into the hands of those who are unsympathetic or sceptical ; and, as it seems to us, there is no body of English Christians who might, more fittingly than we Evangelicals, make it in a special sense their own.

If these three pleas should obtain a favourable hearing amongst us, the advantages that would follow could not fail to be many and great. In the first place, the reproach would soon be rolled away from us that we harp exclusively and *ad nauseam* on what concerns the beginnings of the Christian life ; that our teaching is solely evangelistic and conversional, that we have little interest in, or insight into, the heights and depths of the various experiences

which accompany growth in saintliness, and therefore have little help or guidance to offer to those who are developing in sanctity and spirituality.

Secondly, we should be drawn closer together. We should be brought to a fuller realization of the smallness of the things which divide us in comparison with the greatness of those which unite us. Even on the great question of the inspiration of Scripture our differences would be considerably lessened. We should all realize that inspiration is primarily of the man, and not of the letter, and we should all attain a deepened reverence for the men whose writings show them to have lived in such intimate contact with God. The true nature of the supremacy of the Word of God would become more apparent to us. The more deeply we study spiritual experiences the more does our unfeigned reverence for the Bible grow. That study leads us to believe in its inspiration, not merely as a traditional doctrine which we are bound to uphold, but from a deep and living conviction borne in upon us in our search. Amongst those who have attained to such a conviction there is not likely to be much disagreement as to the precise nature and limits of Biblical inspiration; and, if we do not quite see eye to eye on this matter, we shall be content to differ.

Thirdly, fellowship would be promoted amongst us. The doctrine of justification by faith does not exercise any powerful influence upon our corporate unity. It makes for individualism, inasmuch as it is entirely concerned with the individual's personal relation to God. But the search for the revelation of the Spirit draws us together. It is a corporate matter as well as an individual. The isolated unit cannot receive the full revelation which is promised to the whole body of believers. We realize that we must have fellowship with each other, and follow after the corporate life, in order to be led into all truth.

Fourthly, we should free ourselves from the reproach that we are anti-intellectual and obscurantist, and that our religion largely consists in reiterating with obstinate persistence certain traditional dogmas. Here we have presented to us a field of study which calls for the exercise of the highest intellectual powers; one, moreover, which is far more directly helpful to the practical work of the ministry than many of those which are commonly set before the ordinand. It is hardly possible even cursorily to read such

writings as those of Tauler, or Eckhart, or Walter Hilton or William Law without being personally edified and made a better minister of God. Indeed, it would be hard to name any department of study which is so useful and helpful to the practical work of the ministry as this.

Lastly, the whole tone and spirit of Evangelicalism would be greatly elevated. There is no study like this for making one feel the poverty of one's own spiritual life and experience. It is only as we have ourselves experienced something similar that we can even understand the accounts which others give of their experiences. At every turn we are made conscious of our lack of insight and sympathy and understanding because of our poverty of personal experience. There is thus a constant stimulus given to the desire within us after a deeper spirituality and a closer relation to God. In elevating our inner life, this study could not fail also to elevate our whole preaching and teaching. It would make it impossible for us to preach the Atonement, or any other doctrine, in a hard, unloving and legal way. Our teaching would of necessity assume a more spiritual and experimental character; its helpfulness and power of appeal would be strengthened, and the contribution of Evangelicalism to the common life of the Church would be greatly enhanced.

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