

EVANGELICAL REACTIONS.

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FEW religious schools of thought have the courage to face their problems. They are tempted either to treat them too lightly or to ignore them altogether.

I do not think that Evangelicals are less courageous than others, but even they are inclined at times to slip their heads in bags, and to wait until the clouds roll by. I am thinking especially of one problem which ought to press more heavily upon us than it does, the problem of our losses. Why do so many young people slip through our Evangelical meshes? Why do so many presumably steadier members of Evangelical churches cross the line to diametrically opposite ones? Probably our losses are not more heavy than those of other schools of thought, but why do they exist at all? It is such questions as these which are clamouring for an answer and, if possible, for remedial measures. I propose to offer in this article a small contribution to this problem. If we can discover any vulnerable points in our Evangelical equipment, we shall not lose but gain by facing them. If we have been handling souls wrongly, emphasising non-essentials, or violating common sense by our rules and methods, let us set to work to reform ourselves and our plans.

The simple problem before us, then, is how to find the leak, and, having found it, to stop it. But let us simplify the problem by eliminating a few clear facts about Evangelicals themselves. We must be careful to draw a sharp distinction between real and only seemingly Evangelicals. There are hangers-on in all groups, never really attached, but only swept along as light papers and dead leaves are swept after a rushing train. Nobody is surprised when these depart any more than we are surprised when great streams which leave the rocks intact sweep off the shell-fish. It is only a question of time and opportunity for these mere hangers-on to drop off and be swept away. Mere partisans, too, are bound to be untrustworthy. They have joined a side lightly and just as lightly they will desert it. A name has little adhesive power. A flag may be as easily lowered as raised. A cry often dies in the throat.

Evangelicals who only cling to one another are only as permanent as the ivy which clings only to ivy. But it is the men who cling to their Master who find themselves close to one another because they are close to Him. It is just the same when our Evangelical fires burn out, for then they act like light ashes and are blown away by any wind which prevails at the moment. Anything may happen to an extinct volcano and any rubbish may fill it. I am afraid that burnt-out Evangelicals mislead the critics and set them whooping unwisely. We do not anticipate that their new friends will make much of them when they discover how cold they are.

Neither must we overlook the fact that not all Evangelicals who leave the ranks of their old friends have altogether deserted Evangelical truth. Are there not Evangelical High Churchmen and Evangelical Broad Churchmen too? No man who has ever tasted Gospel truth can ever forget it, and however he may intermingle the Gospel with alien truth or untruth, he cannot eliminate the old pure strain from his pulpit song. And is it not a fact that Evangelical truth acts as a salt upon character and sermon to keep them fresh and stimulating? Their preaching would lose all effective appeal were it not for the Gospel love which went over with them when they recanted all else.

Having so far cleared the way, let us address ourselves freely to the sad problem of loss and defection. How are we to account for it? We shall find a part of the solution, I believe, in the title of this article, "Evangelical Reactions."

Reaction, as we all know, is a law of nature, and in the world of phenomena we see its action daily. That action and reaction are equal was one of the great laws which Newton set forth. If we apply this law to the sphere of Evangelical Christianity, which is our only pursuit now, we shall find how inevitable it is, given the necessary stimulus. We witness it only too disastrously in the sphere of Evangelical history. When the Early Church lost its first love its life slowly ebbed away, betraying its reaction by less simplicity and considerably more complexity. The prophet found himself edged out by the priest, and heresies grew like weeds. It is true there were great persons who seem to have escaped the infection, who went forth evangelising the world, and in an atmosphere of work maintained their simplicity, but the rank and file of ministers and people grew more and more rigid, ceremonious, and

literal. We are inheriting to-day the effects of that early reaction.

Reforming spirits rose here and there, and mystics burrowed through the literal to the spiritual, bringing back the old simplicity, but their tiny lights became suffocated by the pride and supernatural claims of the priesthood. The tide ran too strong towards sacerdotalism to be diverted by the tiny rivulets which flowed from the lowly and the spiritual. Then came that great revolt of eager souls who, pining for a simpler and more Scriptural faith and finding it in the neglected Bible, promoted the Reformation of glorious memory.

Of course, reaction came again, and the Counter-Reformation with its power of fire and sword appeared to throw all back again to its original darkness. But not really so. It winnowed the false from the true, and, like all persecutions, cleared the air. Moreover, it found itself winnowing its own ranks and purging away many of its own impurities. Much blood was spilt, and many fires were kindled, but the truth of God and His holy Gospel could not be bound. After the Puritans came the Restoration reaction with its flood of worldliness and irreligion. No change could have been more extreme than the substitution of a Charles Stuart for an Oliver Cromwell. It was as if the Augean stable, having been purified, reverted to its old state and worse. It was a filthy reaction, and the Court stank in the nostrils of all cleanly men.

When Wesley, Whitfield, and other eager spirits burst upon our beloved land and carried the forgotten Gospel to the slums and by-ways of town and country, the upheaval was glorious. Groveling men and women by the myriad sprang to their feet and gazed heavenwards. The eighteenth century was a dead century, and, needing much the evangelist and the prophet, it responded gallantly. Empty churches were filled again and vast crowds gathered in the early hours to hear the new, yet old, evangel. Upon the top of all this restoration to purer faith and holier living came the Tractarians, whose reaction is still felt in our Church and land. Judged by the standards of to-day, the Tractarian leaders were excellent men, men of God, sane and orthodox men whose work was to restore many forgotten practices and to check the disorderly elements which red-hot eagerness is apt to imbibe. They undoubtedly shifted the emphasis from Evangelicalism to sacerdotalism, but not so violently as the present Anglo-Catholics, who, could the Tractarian

fathers return to earth, would be promptly disowned by them as perilous Romanisers. It is true that some of the former who were extreme went over to Rome, but as honest men they saw no other alternative. It is left to the men of to-day to eat the bread of the English Church but to preach the doctrines and copy the practices of another and alien Church. But we do not need to fetch our illustrations from national Churches or international groups, for we see the same reactions in families. Evangelical homes do not often present an undivided Evangelical harvest. From the strict homes of many an Evangelical parentage wander forth the boys and girls to various goals, many of them, alas! non-Evangelical. Some go straight to the opposite camp and become disciples of Ritualism. Some wander further still, and seek their spiritual home in Rome itself. Not a few plunge into sheer worldliness and become prodigal sons and daughters. With an aching heart the parents see them scatter, and, throwing to the winds all their fervent instructions and warnings, side with error. We must not forget that these are one and all illustrating the power of reaction.

And so it is also in the personal life. Like nations and families, the units, too, are found recoiling from their positions into strange reactions. Who has not wondered when this man or that is suddenly missing from his accustomed place? No man to our minds was more firmly fixed as well as affectionately attached, and yet he is off at a tangent.

A Free Church minister, for instance, suddenly changes over and not only turns into a Churchman but an extreme Ritualist. A Quaker turns the same somersault and from a free lance becomes a devotee of Episcopalianism. Sacraments, priests, and State Church are swallowed at a gulp and without winking. An Evangelical clergyman, devout and thoughtful, fired by some clever Tractarian pamphlet, rushed away from his brethren, his congregation, and his tenets, and was swallowed up in the Roman Church almost before anybody suspected such a bolt. He came back into the Anglican fold, it is true, but later on he went back to the Roman fold and stayed there. Evidently reaction played its part in such a change, and will play it again. For where mental struggles are raging, with nobody to answer hard questions, and they are in despair of getting a sufficient solution, men are only too ready to throw up the sponge and join a Church which claims to be infallible and

will do all their thinking for them. Anything for peace, and by a natural reaction they exchange hard thinking for no thinking at all. It is the reaction of exhaustion and despair.

Let us now see if we can discover any of the causes of reaction. Violent reactions must surely come from violent causes, just as a pendulum swung far out of its natural and regular beat swings back with equal oscillation and reaction. And here, I think, we find the real reason for such reactions as we have been considering. They are all due to extremes. We note this action in the depression which follows extreme hilarity. Your very high-spirited man will be found in the depths of depression. We discover the opposite tendency in people returning from a funeral; their spirits unduly depressed or artificially made so are now unduly raised and keep pace with the trotting of the horses on the return journey after their dreary and unnatural walk thither. As a matter of fact, reaction is the nemesis of extremes.

But have Evangelicals ever gone to such extremes as to lead up to these sad reactions? I fear they have, and I shall seek to point out some of them. So far as Evangelicalism has been a positive creed and life it has done nothing but good, but when it passes over to negative positions and positions of denial and denunciation, reactions have undoubtedly been provoked. No man can take exception to a clear-cut creed. It is refreshing to find men and women knowing precisely what they do believe and to find them holding it warmly, living upon it, and speaking out for it. But when they begin to denounce, to pass harsh judgments, and to excommunicate, they show a less lovely mien. They then become intolerant and unkind.

It is in this region that reactions occur. Suppose I accuse those who differ from me of being in the gall of bitterness, of being outside the kingdom, wolves among the flock, so blackening their characters. It is probable that those whom I am instructing will meet one or two of these black characters and find them angelic in their temper and behaviour. In the violent reaction which ensues my curses will assuredly come home to roost, and faith in my judgment will be undermined. And the reaction will not stop there, for in their indignation they will probably go over body and soul to the defamed side. Can you wonder at it?

Suppose I violate the laws of charity, and in my exasperation

against what I conceive to be erroneous opinions say bitter things against those who I imagine hold them. Bitterness is never lovely, and if to my bitterness I add injustice as well, the reaction will inevitably come when I am discovered to be wrong in my imputations. We may correct in love, and say anything which is just when we say it tenderly, but when the personal note is struck and we assume an angry tone, we get only reactions for our pains. Controversy is like a serpent ; it is innocuous when the sting is extracted.

Suppose I am imperious and arrogant in my assumptions of truth and lay down the law with an air of infallibility ; even if I am right I provoke a reaction from those whose backs have been set up by my authoritative method. Ordinary listeners dislike dictation and command, and prefer to look into things for themselves to being ordered to believe because they are told to do so. After all, other people can think as well as I can, and perhaps better, and why should I ignore their minds and speak *ex cathedra* when they require enlightenment and reasons, and ought to have them ?

Now, I fear that we Evangelicals have laid ourselves open to this kind of reaction because we are prone in our very heat of spirit to try to sweep everybody along with us. We are so sure ourselves that we cannot imagine anybody doubting our contentions. I am not certain, too, that we have not made a sad mistake by aiming mainly at the emotions to the disregard of the reason. We may not ignore the emotions, for they are the driving power within the man, but before we can touch the feelings wisely we must lay a good foundation of truth and reason. Convince the minds of men, and we shall find the emotions laid open before us. To do otherwise is to stoke your furnace before you have replenished it with good fuel. Perhaps this is the reason that we sometimes alienate the wiser minds of the community. They ask for bread and we give them putty.

Suppose, again, with a whole peal of bells to ring, I strike one monotonous bell and give the people anything but melody. I may preach one favourite doctrine until the congregation feel as sick of it as the Israelites did of the manna. I have perhaps one favourite colour, and keep flashing it in the wearied eyes of my people, forgetting that there are six other brilliant hues which make up white light and all kinds of beautiful combinations. We cannot play tunes on one note, and we cannot satisfy souls with one doc-

trine, however prominent and vital. If I try to do it, I am in for a bad reaction, and the truth, as well as souls, will suffer. Is it not only too true that the new religions which rise up all around us to-day are the fruits of one-sidedness in preachers? In our one-eyed vision we have missed some complementary truths and have dropped out some important phases of truth, so that in the reaction which we have evoked others step in with the ignored view emphasised.

It is probable, too, that as an Evangelical I have unnecessarily narrowed my outlook and meddled with little things to the exclusion of the greater and the more massive. I may have fussed about minutiae when magnitudes and masses called for treatment. The bigger minds in our congregations resent this, and feel that the preacher ought to soar higher, drink deeper, and keep in touch with the larger movements of men's minds. They miss the scientific touch, the allusions to the great problems of life, and the assurance that their minister is abreast of the times. Of course, this may be overdone, the personal be overlooked in the general, and the Master be swept aside for the smaller masters of earthly religions. Still, our critics are right in the main, and unless we can respond to people's natural cravings, we may expect a reaction will lead them to weigh anchor and sail away to broader seas.

Suppose that I am over-cautious in my dealings with the world in which I live and in my anxiety to be right pass many innocent things and practices under condemnation. The old Pharisee gathered up his skirts when he passed a Publican for fear of contamination. There is a similar exercise of caution with many of us Evangelicals. We are mortally afraid of the world, and in our separation we scatter our labels about promiscuously and attach bad names to many innocent things. If in our lawful anxiety to be safe we draw the line too tight and become stricter than the occasion warrants, we are digging an ugly pit for ourselves and our young people. Many of these have been already precipitated into this chasm, and more will follow unless we adopt less dangerous definitions. 'Besides, is it not beginning at the wrong end, putting the world into forms rather than spirit, and making rules when we should be impressing principles? The Evangelical who bans all novels, all places of entertainment, all parties, is making too rigid and artificial lines, and sowing for a harvest which will not be exactly

what he expects or desires. Suppose, too, I indulge in a too free use of pious expressions and shibboleths supposed to be the notes of our Evangelical school. Originally they did their work because they were fresh and unworn. Now that they have become more or less a fashion and a fetish, they only provoke reactions of disgust and cavil. If I use these expressions to-day, I am not so wise or so pious as I think I am. They will never serve their old intention again, and the continued use of them will cause them to act as missiles to hurt and drive away the very souls we are trying to impress. Expressions are like clothes, they do excellently well so long as they are reasonably new, but when they begin to be threadbare and shabby they are good only to be given away or thrown away. A good many of our Evangelical reactions are due to these worn-out expressions.

I am not sure, too, but that we have irritated people unnecessarily by our aggressive methods. Zeal is splendid so long as it is discharged with wisdom and discretion. It is good to be faithful, but "let not their precious balm break my head." I am thinking of that ruder type of Evangelical who asks rude and abrupt questions of strangers in the street and demands an answer then and there. I am thinking, too, of those Evangelicals who go about like a black thundercloud, threatening judgments on all and sundry who do not think exactly as they do. Eager and hot-hearted Christians we all admire, but not when they blister. I am afraid they have bred more blasphemers than believers by such rough-and-ready methods.

Perhaps, too, we have been too individualistic. Not that we can do anything else than begin with the individual; not that we should ever forget the individual; not that we should leave our own individuality out, but that we should not press the individual to the exclusion of the many. Perhaps we have been looking a little askance at societies of men and women, and especially at that great society the Church of the Living God. I fear we have to our loss. We have been prone to miss much of the Communion of Saints. We have been more keen in winning the masses to Christ than in getting closer to those who already believe on His Name. The danger is not on one side only, for if there be a danger of forgetting the society in our love of the individual, we are none the less in danger of forgetting the individual in the society.

Perhaps many of us have been too ready to talk religion as if it were the hall-mark of reality, forgetting that talking, like walking, must have some objective. To talk for talking's sake is hardly wise and may be wasteful of good breath ; besides, there is so much to do that to spend our time in talking may steal it from working. Religious gossip is not so commendable as many think, and may easily weaken the fibre of our spiritual life. Forced conversations are unnatural. Reserve has its province as well as talk, and to hold the tongue may be as much a means of grace as even the best of talk. To meander away into mere talk about religion makes more for shallowness than depth. Besides, the reactions which wait upon garrulousness have to be taken into account.

A sad nemesis waits, too, on over-emotionalism. To make feelings the test of reality or of health is seriously to mislead souls. The physical is never a safe guide to reality of spiritual experience, although it is bound to be present in more or less force whenever the faith be keen and strong. This has been the danger which has menaced Missions and Conferences. The bait of keener feelings and deeper peace has been dangled before the minds and hearts of weary humanity, and so long as it is the main or only bait, the menace is great and imminent. Over-pressed emotions have not unfrequently passed into mental derangement, and the over-stressed souls who have not learned the ephemeral nature of feelings have recoiled so seriously as to lapse into sheer unbelief and worldliness. Such methods really tempt reactions and lead straight to them.

Some of the more extreme among the Evangelicals have much to answer for in the production of sad reactions. In a world of change they are all for stern conservatism. There is such a magic and glamour about the old ways and the old methods that to deviate a hair's-breadth from the past is to hover over the edge of the pit. No class of men and women do more to kill Evangelicalism than these. Barring the way to improvements in setting forth truth, in helping the spirit of devotional worship, and so setting up their own wills against the multitude, they cause such heartburnings among the younger Evangelicals that they desert the Evangelical ranks for the freer and more modern schools of religious thought. These are the men who saw in the sung *Amens*, the white surplice, and the chanted *Psalms* the thin edge of the wedge of pure Roman-

ism. Many of our young people have been driven out of the Evangelical fold by these tactics and ways.

The resistance also of many Evangelicals to modern thought has produced a reaction among the thoughtful. There are Diehards in the world of thought who lag behind the rest of the world and fight to the last ditch against any new scientific revelation. Evangelicals have not as a rule been keen to follow or accept modern interpretations of the universe. From the best of motives certainly, because they feared for the Ark of God, feared for the purity of their faith, feared for the integrity of their Holy Bible. But the faith and the Bible stand as firm and as true as ever, and we may boldly say that we hold a more intelligible Bible for the discoveries of learned men in the fields of science, archæology, and criticism. We have yielded much in the past to the contentions of investigators, and we have not lost, but gained, by our larger view of life and truth. But our unintelligent resistance has yielded a terrible aftermath, for those children of our faith who deserted us and our creed because of our resistance will probably never come back to us.

We have so far treated of the fact of reaction and of the causes of it. We have yet to gather the lessons of reaction, which we have hitherto only hinted at. And the first surely is that we should beware of extremes. Truth rarely lies in the extremities, and to push it to the extremest point is to land it on the very brink of danger. Extremes meet, we are told, and push on far enough to the East, you arrive at the West. A truth held fanatically is never held sanely. When the Spartans made helots drunk, they trusted that in the reaction caused by their example their own sons would be eminently sober, and so they became. Any view may be made absurd by over-emphasis, and the best of causes can be shipwrecked by avoiding the middle passage and sailing too near the other side. The *Via Media* is not always mere calculation, and is not always associated with a cool temper; it is an effort to steer a clear passage between Scylla and Charybdis.

A second lesson is surely a monitory one. We may trace extremes by their reactions. When we do not gain converts but lose them, when we see men and women revolting against our methods and manners, when instead of impressing we raise ridicule, we may be sure that this is a call to consideration. The offence of the Cross is a real one, and we shall surely experience it, but this does

not cover our own blameworthy crosses. We do not win by irritating, and if our people are irritated we may be the cause of it, and we must therefore take warning and amend. It may be human perversity, but then again it may be *our* perversity.

A third lesson lies upon the surface ; we shall escape a good deal of life's terrible reactions by attending to the spirit as the main preventive. It is not truth but the way in which we handle it that exacerbates and blisters. The man who can say hard things softly and handle crippled limbs tenderly is saved nearly all reactions of temper and groans. Roughness is fatal. We can say strong things lovingly and we can say soft things harshly. We have to learn how to lower the voice, how to throw gentleness into the features, and how to allow for the feelings of others. It is all a matter of love, and love comes not by command but by character ; it comes by the way of the Cross.

The last lesson I would advance is the necessity, not of being less and less Evangelical, but of becoming more and more so. Honesty and charity do not imply that we should moderate our convictions or proclaim them less boldly ; we may not play fast and loose with truth as we conceive it. To cool off for the sake of charity is to head straight to decay and ruin. What we must mitigate is our fierce tempers, our denial of good in others who differ from us, our intemperate denunciation of men rather than of untruths and errors. The side which keeps its temper best is almost always in the right, for why should men with a strong case lose it ? Positive truth positively expressed, an Evangelical life to follow it, and a Christ-like spirit pervading all, are the best for Evangelicals. Christ the perfect Way, the Cross the perfect medium, an open way for simple souls to approach the Mercy-seat, one clear condition of faith and repentance, the certainty of an immediate response from Him who never casts out, the possibility of knowing rather than of guessing, the personal assurance of reception and salvation, a Lord received by way of the heart rather than by the lips, and then a life lived out by faith in the Son of God in personal communion, joyous service, and much praise.

We must proclaim far and wide that a faith which is not Evangelical is not the faith demanded of all men ; all additions and accretions only dilute and adulterate the Gospel and throw up hindrances in the way of life.