

UNMEDIATED ACCESS TO CHRIST AND THE FREE GRACE OF GOD.

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I

THERE can be no doubt about the value of the service which Evangelicalism has rendered to the cause of religion by its insistence on the right of direct access to Christ for every individual, and on the fundamental importance to religious life of the experience thus acquired of the grace of God freely given, in forgiveness, in fellowship and in strengthening influence. Furthermore, in its clear grasp of these facts lies, perhaps, the greatest contribution which Evangelicalism can make to the religious life of to-day; for a glance at the present situation suggests that the greatest need of the moment, as a steadying influence and a corrective to dangerous tendencies, is for a quiet and steadfast witness to these fundamental principles of our Christian experience.

As the purpose of this Conference is practical, it is important to keep in mind the question of the way in which Evangelicalism can best make its contribution, both in this and in other directions. At the moment we may remind ourselves of three points.

(a) Evangelicals will not succeed in making any decisive contribution unless they close up their ranks. There is, so far as I know, complete unanimity with regard to the subject we are now considering, but in general, a totally wrong impression is produced as to the real nature of the religious thought and life of the country as a whole by our lack of unity in speech and action. If only we can learn to disregard minor differences and realize our unity on fundamental points, we will have the power to make a contribution of vital importance to the life of the nation.

(b) While our witness on the point of grace must be clear and definite, it must not be one-sided. There is the danger, continually illustrated in the history of religious movements, of emphasizing one aspect of the truth to the neglect of another. In bearing witness to the truth of immediate access to Christ and the free grace of God, we must avoid giving the impression that we neglect or depreciate the Ministry or Sacraments as means of grace.

(c) Some measure of united action is called for: but ultimately truth is never promoted merely by organization. We must be ready to give an account of the faith which is in us. Evangelicalism, rooted in freedom, can never refuse this challenge, save at the price of death. If present circumstances are calling on us to bear witness to what we have learnt about the dealings of God with man, our witness must not be merely the united testimony of a large body, but must include a clear statement of the grounds on which we base our convictions. A call to witness is a call to renewed study.

II

It is, of course, impossible, in a short paper, to embark on any adequate study of the subject, but we must notice three lines along which we must be prepared to justify our position.

(a) First, there is the appeal to the Bible. It is important to insist that the evidence of the Bible should be regarded as decisive. There is, of course, the difficulty of interpretation in detail. But the following points, which bear on our subject, seem to be fairly clear. 1. The light which has been thrown on the ministry of the period of the New Testament, especially on the growth of the three-fold ministry of Bishop, Priest and Deacon, does not suggest that the Christian minister was intended to be an intermediary through whom only, or even normally, the individual could approach Christ or receive grace.¹ 2. The whole sacerdotal idea of the ministry, characteristic of the Old Testament, is strikingly absent from the pages of the New Testament. In the Pauline writings all the stress is on the pastoral character of the ministry. St. Peter speaks of all Christians as a royal priesthood.² The outlook of the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews is summed up in the vividly clear phrase, "Having therefore a great High Priest, etc., let us draw near with boldness to the throne of grace."³ 3. The reason for this change in the conception of the Ministerial office may be clearly seen in the argument of the same Epistle. The writer perceived (and states with great fullness) that all that for which the Old Testament priesthood and sacrificial system stood was fulfilled in and by Our Lord, and that the grace of God, only partially and inadequately received through such institutions, was brought within the reach of all mankind in all its fullness through Jesus Christ. If this writer's outlook is typical of the thought of his day, the change in the conception of ministry was clearly inevitable.

These facts, together with the emphasis which New Testament writers lay upon their own experience of fellowship with Christ and upon all which this meant to them, in contrast to what they had won through the legal or sacrificial system of the Old Testament, seem to me to make it clear that New Testament teaching and practice alike support those who insist on the importance of emphasizing the reality of unmediated access to Christ and of the free grace of God.

(b) In addition to the appeal to scripture, we must be prepared to appeal to reason. This is after all only part of the process of interpreting scripture. Revelation and reason are not opposed to one another. In this connection, I would venture to suggest that it is important to think out the meaning of grace and try to get a clear idea of its nature. It is a somewhat vague word, and has had unfortunate vicissitudes in its theological journey down the ages. The question is complicated also by the fact that grace can

¹ Cf. Lightfoot's *Essay on the Ministry* and Dr Headlam's *The Doctrine of the Church and Reunion*.

² 1 Peter ii. 9.

³ Hebrews iv. 14 and 16.

come to us in many ways, and that we can distinguish many kinds of help which it brings to us. But, without attempting to treat the subject fully, may I suggest that behind all this variety in manifestation grace is ultimately always to be thought of in terms of personality. God may use, as a means of His grace towards me, a flower or the song of a bird, a picture, a sunset or a "chorus ending of Euripides," or any of the elements, material or personal, in my environment; but in the long run, what constitutes the grace is the touch, as it were, of God's Spirit on my spirit. In other words, grace, in whatever way it comes to us and whatever the kind of help it brings, is nothing more nor less than the influence of the divine personality working on a finite personality. The full revelation of the divine has been given to man in Christ. Hence it is through Christ that the fullness of God's grace is experienced. And since, as we have seen, grace is personal influence, reason at once suggests that it must work in accordance with certain laws of personality. Since God is a moral and spiritual being, we can be sure that He will deal with us along moral and spiritual lines. To take an example, we can understand how the offer of God's grace as seen in forgiveness is coupled in the New Testament with a call to repentance and an attitude of trust; but to imagine that when a man turns to God in repentance and faith God could refuse to respond until the seeker had performed some outward ceremony, or would not grant, let us say, His forgiveness except through a human minister, is to descend from the level of the personal to the mechanical, or to work on a conception of the divine personality which is surely transcended in our dealings with one another on the level of ordinary human life.

(c) A third line along which we must be prepared to give an account of our faith is that of experience. We would not in all probability be slow in attempting this, and to some extent we would be well qualified; for one of the secrets of the strength of Evangelicalism has been its emphasis on personal religion. The appeal to the evidence of experience is of vital importance, for Christianity is not a theory of life, but a way of living; ultimately we must judge it by its fruits. The argument, however, from experience must be used with care. In bringing forward our own experience as evidence, we must not, on the one hand, overlook other classes of people, whose experience has not been quite the same as ours, nor, on the other hand, must we isolate our experience on one point from the whole range of our experience in general. If we avoid these mistakes, we will recognize that the divine grace comes to men in many ways, and we will not overlook or depreciate the importance of the various means of grace. But I believe that, if there is one thing more than another which may be regarded as an assured result of the experience of countless individuals from the beginning of the Christian era down to the present day, it is that the individual can go direct to Christ, and through Him receive from God peace, joy and the help to live a new life. This may be taken to be so indisputable and well established a fact that it cannot be minimized

in the interests of any theory of ministry or sacraments, but on the contrary must be taken into account in any attempt to arrive at a reasonable conception of such institutions.

III

So far, in emphasizing the freeness and fullness of Grace which comes to all through Jesus Christ, we have been dwelling mainly on the individual aspect of the matter. There is also the corporate side ; and there is need that Evangelicals should bear witness to this to-day with all their power. My experience leads me to think that there is an impression abroad that Evangelicals do not sufficiently stress the corporate side of religion nor see much value in the Church, the Ministry or the Sacraments as means of grace ; that there is a good deal of misunderstanding as to what we do believe ; and that clear teaching as to our belief on these subjects would be welcomed and do a great deal towards establishing the reasonableness of our position. We must make it clear that we do, of course, regard these things as means of grace ; but that, in the light of the conception of grace mentioned above, we are unable to accept any view which makes them mechanical means of grace. The Sacraments, e.g. are not a means of grace, either in the sense that some effect in the realm of grace is impossible apart from them (e.g. regeneration in Baptism) or in the sense that through their use grace is inevitably conveyed ; but that they are real, and amongst the most important, means by which, if rightly used, grace comes to and is appropriated by us, would be found to be true in the experience of the great majority of Christians. So with regard to the Minister, although the conditions of receiving grace are simply that one can go to God through Christ in repentance and faith, yet the Minister can give help to the individual, both in originating and strengthening the life of grace, by his ministry of the Word and of the Sacraments, by his visiting and his godly counsel, and in many other ways. The Church, and this carries with it the corporate side of life, is important to the Evangelical just because he keeps his idea of grace, as it were, on the personal level. Just because grace is ultimately personal, it may come to us most fully through persons (not as officials but as inspired personalities), and fellowship with God through Christ means fellowship with one another ; and the fullness of the life of grace comes not in isolation, but through sharing (giving and taking) one with another. The Church holds a vital place in the pages of the New Testament, because it is a living body sharing in one common life, the life of the Spirit, all the members growing together towards perfection and fullness of life.

It is obvious that what has been said above cannot be regarded as more than a slender outline of certain aspects of a large and important subject, but it may not be without value if it serves to emphasize the importance of this side of religious truth, and especially to direct attention, in this connection, to the necessity of think-

ing out a clear conception of the nature of divine grace. It may be doubted whether anything is more important than this for the solution of some of the problems with which we are faced. If we are to succeed in doing this we must keep in mind the evidence, which is abundant, in the New Testament and the facts of Christian experience as a whole, both throughout the ages and at the present day, and we must interpret all this evidence in accordance with reason. The present situation demands not only that we should bear witness to a certain view of grace, but also that we should be able, as I have suggested above, to show that it is in accord with the Bible (especially with the New Testament), with Christian experience and with reason. A conception of grace which fulfils these requirements will be found, I believe, to be one in the light of which we cannot fail to perceive the truth, of vital importance to the presentation of the Evangelical outlook, and, what is more important, essential to the unhampered development of full religious life, of the belief in freedom of access to Christ and, through Him, to all the blessings of divine love; a conception, also, in the light of which we will be able to present the true place of the Church, the Ministry and the Sacraments in the whole of the Christian life and to understand their necessity and true nature as means of grace. Finally, while such facts as these need to be emphasized in every age, the need that they should be re-emphasized to-day is especially urgent; and any work we may do along these lines, and any witness we bear to these facts will, I am convinced, be of real value to the religious life of our nation as a whole.

NOTE.—We regret that we have been unable to include Mr. W. Guy Johnson's paper on "Sacerdotalism" in this number of THE CHURCHMAN. We hope to print it in the October number.—[ED.]

