

878TH ORDINARY GENERAL MEETING

HELD AT 12, QUEEN ANNE'S GATE, LONDON, S.W.1, AT 5.30 P.M.
ON MONDAY, MAY 24TH, 1948.

AIR COMMODORE P. J. WISEMAN, C.B.E., IN THE CHAIR.

The Minutes of the previous Meeting were read, confirmed and signed.

The following elections were announced :—V. D. K. C. Ross, Esq., Fellow ; E. C. Staddon, Esq., A.M.I.E.E., Member ; Rev. E. W. L. May, M.A., Member ; William Bennet, Esq., M.A., Member ; E. F. Witts, Esq., Member ; Rev. H. F. MacEwen, B.A., B.D., Member ; G. V. Prosser, Esq., Associate.

The CHAIRMAN then called upon the President, Sir Frederic G. Kenyon, G.B.E., K.C.B., D.Litt., LL.D., F.B.A., to deliver his Presidential Address entitled "New Testament Criticism To-day."

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS.

NEW TESTAMENT CRITICISM TO-DAY.

BY SIR FREDERIC G. KENYON, G.B.E., K.C.B., D.Litt.,
LL.D., F.B.A.

I SHOULD like to take this opportunity to review the present position of New Testament criticism. It seems to me that we have come to a point where that position should be re-assessed and a fresh departure made in the light of modern discoveries and critical examinations relating to the Bible. Biblical criticism should not be static. Throughout the ages it has varied from time to time, and when it has solidified and become stationary, it has been in danger of losing touch with contemporary thought, and thereby losing influence on contemporary life. Its duty, as it seems to me, is to be cautiously progressive, holding fast that which is true, testing all things,

but ready to assimilate that which is found sound in new thought and new discoveries. It is of the essence of such a society as ours that it should be awake to new developments, though I hope it will always be content to move cautiously and to accept only that which, on full examination, is found to be soundly based.

There seems to me to be special reason for such a re-assessment now. In the nineteenth century we passed through a period when two different points of view stood in strong contrast—a traditional habit of uncritical acceptance of what seemed to be the face-value of the Biblical record and, on the other hand, a strongly critical attitude which held all tradition to be suspect and new interpretations to be sought and preferred. The conflict between these two points of view, strongly held by two different types of mind, led to a great unsettlement of belief, of which we are now experiencing the consequences. The twentieth century, on the other hand, has been a period of objective research, archaeological and literary, the results of which have been steadying and re-assuring to those who look to the Bible as the supremely authoritative guide to life. Much of the froth of extravagant and ill-founded theorising which characterised the middle of the nineteenth century has been cleared away and we are in a better position now than before both to get rid of the dead word of a too stationary tradition and to discard the extravagances of ill-founded conjecture. New Testament criticism has, in fact, in the past been too much under the influence of two conflicting streams of thought; on the one hand the remains of fundamentalism, on the other the remains of Tübingenism. The former is the outcome of too little criticism, the latter of too much. We are now, I believe, in a position to discard what was mistaken on either side, to absorb much new knowledge that has been brought to light during the past generation, and to make a fresh start on more assured foundations.

Such a review of the present position of Biblical criticism seems to me all the more necessary in view of the recent resuscitation of mid-nineteenth century criticism by the Bishop of Birmingham in his book *The Rise of Christianity*. Such a book, issued under the name of one who holds so high a position in the Church of England, may well have much weight among those who do not realise that it is a revival of a school of thought which was discredited half a century ago, that it is full of mis-statements and uncritical assumptions, that it ignores most of the advances in knowledge made within the past generation and by no means

represents the up-to-date criticism of to-day. I have tried to substantiate these assertions in a booklet recently published; but I cannot assume that this has reached all the members of the Institute, and the matter is so important that some insistence upon it may be permissible.

No one reading the Bishop's book without previous knowledge of the subject would realise that it is a revival of the ultra-sceptical valuation of the books of the New Testament which had its vogue in the second half of the nineteenth century, and which in this country was represented by such works as *Supernatural Religion*, by W. R. Cassels (1874-77), and the articles of van Manen and Schmiedel in *Encyclopædia Biblica* (1899-1903). The Bishop conceals this fact by giving no authority for his assertions beyond frequent references to unnamed "analytical scholars," whose dates and authority are left completely obscure. This book is, moreover, vitiated by its ready acceptance of any anti-orthodox view however slight the evidence in its favour, and its almost complete ignoring of the progress of knowledge in the last half-century. This progress, be it observed, does not merely represent a change in subjective opinion; it is the result of objective discoveries due to archæological research. In some cases these additions to concrete knowledge are wholly ignored; in others they are barely mentioned and then left aside as though they were of no importance.

The latter is the case with the most striking modern discovery in this category, the Rylands fragment of St. John's Gospel, supported as it is by the "New Gospel" fragments in the British Museum, both of them published in 1935. The former of these is barely mentioned by the Bishop, the latter is not mentioned at all. Both of these manuscripts are assigned (not by theological controversialists but by objective papyrologists, on purely palæographical grounds) to the first half of the second century. Now if the Fourth Gospel, which is universally regarded as the latest of the four Gospels, and indeed the latest of the books of the New Testament except perhaps the Second Epistle of Peter, was circulating in Egypt in the first half of the second century, the date of its composition is thrown so far back as to make it hypercritical to reject its traditional assignment to the last decade or so of the first century—that is, within the life-time of St. John as recorded in general early tradition, and in any case within the life-time of those who had known the disciples of our Lord.

If this be so, the whole fabric of the Bishop's criticism, and that of the scholars whom he is belatedly following, falls with a crash to the ground. While placing St. Mark's Gospel about A.D. 75-85, he assigns the other Gospels and Acts to the second century, together with much of the Epistles (both Pauline and Canonical), notably the historical sections of 1 Corinthians, and thereby interposes an interval of from fifty to a hundred years between the life of Our Lord and the extant records of it. All his reverence (the genuineness of which there is no reason to question) for the character and teachings of our Lord cannot obscure the fact that he has cut away nearly all the ground for belief in the historicity of our knowledge of His life and teachings and all our belief in His divine nature. But all this argument collapses if the first-century dates of the New Testament books are assured. We must go back to the position affirmed half a century ago by no less an authority than Harnack, that "in all main points and in most details the earliest literature of the Church is from a literary-historical point of view trustworthy and dependable . . . The chronological framework in which the tradition has arranged the documents is, in all the principal points, from the Pauline Epistles to Irenaeus, correct. . . . The time [of the school of Baur] is over. It was an episode during which science learnt much, and after which it must forget much."

It would be highly unfortunate if the Bishop's book were taken to represent the views of modern scholarship. It is in fact merely a revival of a school of thought which reached its climax about three-quarters of a century ago, was then discredited by the scholarship of such men as Lightfoot and Harnack, and of which the ground has since been cut away by the discoveries of the twentieth century.

The point which I wish to make, and which I think cannot be too emphatically repeated at this time, is that we ought to free ourselves from the prepossessions, whether ultra-conservative or ultra-radical, prevalent at the end of the nineteenth century, to recognise the steady effect of the objective advances in archæological criticism affecting the dates of the New Testament books during the present century, and, so to speak, take breath for further progress on the basis of assured first century dates for practically all of them. The effect of the Tübingen school of criticism was to set free a flood of scepticism which shook the faith of many who were unable themselves to test its validity, and to throw the defenders of the Christian tradition on the

defensive. We are now entitled to make a fresh start, free alike from the uncritical obscurantism of the sixteenth and later centuries and from the ultra-critical extravagances of the nineteenth century. We can accept criticism and utilise it, satisfying and indeed welcoming the results of scholarship, as showing that the external foundations of the Christian belief stand sure.

It may be observed in passing that the establishment of such a position as this is a remarkable vindication of the best British scholarship of the last two generations. There was, no doubt, a general unwillingness to accept the results, not merely of the Tübingen hypothesis, but of any progressive research into the history and development of the books of both Testaments; but the best British scholars, while ready to accept the assured results of literary and archæological research, were not led away by the extravagant licence of much Continental scholarship. The works of Lightfoot, Salmon, Westcott, Gore, Sanday, and many others stand, in effect, secure and dependable to-day, while scores of extravagant speculations which had their temporary vogue abroad and affected not a few in this country, have vanished down the wind into oblivion. The motto, *Festina lente*, holds good here as in other fields of scholarship.

The point which those who are inclined to accept disruptive criticism of the New Testament books have to face is the very limited period within which the developments that they postulate must have taken place. If the Fourth Gospel is securely fixed, as it now appears to be, to a date not later than the last decade of the first century, we have to find room before that for the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, and before that again for the Gospel of Mark and the compilation known as Q, which they utilise. That brings back the date of St. Mark to the neighbourhood of the date of the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70—I am not concerned now with considering whether it should be placed shortly before or shortly after that event. On the other hand, we have as our limit the date of the Crucifixion, which must lie between A.D. 29 and 33 (see *New Commentary on Holy Scripture*, N.T., p. 730). There is therefore only the period between (approximately) A.D. 30 and 70 for the development of the Gospel story; and from this a considerable portion must be cut off from the beginning, before the need for a written record of the Lord's life would have become apparent. When the Second Coming was regarded as imminent, there was no need of

such a record. There is, at best, little evidence of the existence of such a record in St. Paul's epistles. Some materials may have been accumulating, but they can hardly have amounted to more than sporadic reminiscences or formulations of belief. St. Luke's affirmation of the existence of works by "many [who] have taken in hand to set forth a declaration of those things which are most surely believed among us"—declarations resting on the gathered testimony of eye-witnesses, can hardly be taken to cover a period of more than some twenty years, say between A.D. 55 and 75. Only some such period as that is available for such development as may be taken to precede the assured tradition as we find it in the narratives of Matthew and Luke; and part of that is already occupied by Mark.

There is, therefore, as it seems to me, little time for the elaborate processes of what is now known as "Formgeschichte," as expounded by Dibelius and accepted with curious readiness by some scholars in this country. It implies the existence of collections of anecdotes and narratives, of different characters and various qualities, in systematical categories; and this again implies a good deal of inter-communication of written material between different parts of the Christian community scattered over the Roman world, between Rome and Ephesus and Antioch and Jerusalem and Alexandria. Speculation must be checked by the hard facts of chronology and topography and the material conditions under which Christianity developed. I cannot help thinking that many of the speculations on which modern theories rest imply an inadequate conception of the historical circumstances amid which the books of the New Testament came into being. Theories which involve long processes of development, of the creation, classification, combination, publication and circulation of material seem to me to be ruled out by the hard facts of chronology and the conditions, so far as we know them, of the primitive Christian communities. Bishop Barnes is by no means alone in ignoring what may be called bibliographical probabilities, but he seems to me exceptionally free in his assumption of the existence of *disjecta membra*, which at some time in the second century were collected in the form in which we now possess the books of the New Testament. He and not a few other critics appear to assume that the letters of St. Paul, written approximately between A.D. 52 and 66, suffered a process of detrition in the course of the next sixty or seventy years until the surviving fragments were collected and put together with the addition of

highly important passages of later origin, and issued substantially as we now know them. Dr. Barnes is inclined to believe that the first collection was made by the heretic Marcion about A.D. 140.

Looked at bibliographically, the difficulties of such a theory seem to me not to be realised by its advocates. It implies that the original letters of St. Paul (of which copies were evidently sent to other churches) had been suffered to disappear or to be mutilated (I don't know which is the less likely assumption) so that the way was free for a second-century editor to re-issue them with the addition of supplementary passages either found existing without known authorship or invented by the editor. Take, for example, the first Epistle to the Corinthians, on which Dr. Barnes lays much stress. He does not deny that portions of it are Pauline, but much of it, including the narratives of the Last Supper and the Crucifixion and Resurrection and the hymn in praise of Charity, he would regard as much later additions, and not all from the same source. The chapter dealing with the Resurrection story would be a deliberate falsification, since it speaks of the existence of many witnesses of the Risen Lord; the evidence of some person or persons present at the Last Supper is implied; while the eulogy of Charity is of so distinct a literary quality as to involve yet another author. Now how did Marcion or any other editor about the middle of the second century impose this agglomeration on the Christian world? Would the affirmations of a heretic command general acceptance? The Church of Corinth would surely be in a position to say, "This is not the letter which we received from the Apostle," and other churches which had obtained copies at the first would also detect and question the falsified form. And how would this form be spread over the various scattered churches and obtain unanimous acceptance to the exclusion of all previous copies? If the church at Corinth had preserved St. Paul's original letters, or even copies of them, it would have said of the expanded composition, "These are not the letters we received." If it had lost them, it would have said, "What are these letters which purport to have been written to us, but of which we have no record?" Bibliographically the thing does not make sense.

The position for which I would argue is that the books of the New Testament must be taken much more at their face value, as they would be if they were works of pagan literature. They are open to criticism, but there is no case for destructive scepticism.

Now I think that the attitude of the Victoria Institute with regard to Biblical criticism is a matter of great importance. It is the regrettable fact that the traditional acceptance of Christian doctrine in this country has been severely shaken. The spectacular advances of science in the latter part of the nineteenth century, and its confident claim to provide a complete basis for human life went far to detach the younger generation from the unquestioning belief of their forefathers in Christian beliefs and Christian practice; and this tendency was intensified by the uncritical character of much of the Christian defence. If the lost ground is to be regained, it must be on a basis which accepts the assured results of natural science and historical criticism, and which shows that they are fully reconcilable with Christian belief. This involves no departure from the principles of the Institute. As I quoted last year from the records of its foundation, our object is "to investigate fully and impartially the most important questions of Philosophy and Science . . . with the view of reconciling any apparent discrepancies between Christianity and Science."

It would be fatal if we took up the position of refusing to consider the assured results (so far as they are assured) of natural science and free historical criticism. Our claims would then simply be brushed aside, as they too often are, as unfounded and out of date. If the coming generations are to be won back to Christian beliefs, it must be on the basis that these are compatible with the best history and the soundest science, and that they supply what science and history by themselves have conspicuously failed to supply, a guide to the human race along lines of peace and mutual charity. This we can fully do without departing from the principles which the Institute was founded to support. Our duty is not to stand fast obstinately in old ways which satisfied those who had grown up in pre-critical days or with pre-critical beliefs, but to be cautiously progressive, prepared to welcome the results of modern knowledge and modern points of view—in short, to "prove all things, and hold fast that which is good."

The essence of our position, as I have tried to argue before, is the recognition of the principle of *progressive* revelation, and of the existence of human elements in the records which have come down to us in Holy Scripture. On the one hand, we must get rid of the Victorian habit of miscellaneous text hunting, by which any words in the Bible might be taken as applicable to

all times and any circumstances, regardless of their original context. We have also to recognise, what many have found difficult to recognise, that there may be human imperfections in the record. What is important is to see and to maintain that imperfections in the historical record do not affect the moral teaching in the Bible, nor its fundamental basis in the Divine Person of our Lord. On the contrary, I maintain that we shall find that historical and literary criticism applied to the Old Testament removes many difficulties inevitably connected with primitive states of society, and brings out more clearly the moral value of the teaching of the great prophets who preceded the full revelation of Jesus Christ. We have not to throw over the Old Testament, as some would do, but to recognise its enduring value, both in itself and as leading up to that which was to come.

This, surely, is compatible—and indeed only this is compatible, with the recognition that the present life is a time of trial. We are given the means of finding the way that leads to eternal life, but we have got to find it. Accordingly, while we believe that we have the words of eternal life, the interpretation and application of them is left to us. This is a world of trial, and it is in accordance with this fundamental principle that we are challenged to interpret the Scriptures.

And it is only so that we can hope to win back the world to the Christian view and the Christian way of life. It is quite useless to attempt to impose our view by dogmatic assertions. Still less is it helpful to denounce those who at present hold aloof as “atheists” or “infidels.” Their characters, their practice, their beliefs often stand high, even though we may believe that their roots do not stand sure. It is useless to hope to impress them unless we can show that the full Christian doctrine can stand up to modern criticism. Then we can hope to show that Christianity, so far from being incompatible with modern science and scholarship, is their complement, and supplies the foundation which they by themselves have proved unable to do. The times are favourable for such an advance. The positiveness of science in its power to provide a complete explanation of life and a guide to conduct is weakening; and the way is open for a re-assertion not only of the reasonableness of faith, but of the essential need for it. On the one hand we can point to the now admitted fact that natural science cannot claim, and does not in fact claim, to cover the essential fields of morals and theological belief; and on the other we can claim that

modern knowledge has re-established the historicity of the Christian record. On that basis we can go forward to re-assert the *spiritual* values in life, which have been too much obscured by the assertion of materialistic values and claims.

We are, I think, all the more entitled to insist on the essential importance of a spiritual interpretation of life by pointing to the results of two generations of weakened faith and lessened Christian teaching and belief. They have led us to two wars of world-wide devastation, and in the second of these an appalling revelation of human depravity and abandonment of moral standards. Twice within a generation we have had to face claims of domination resting upon unbridled power, and in the second case on an avowed denial of Christian standards and even of ordinary decent human morality. I think it is not without significance that the outstanding leaders against this flood of evil have been men who made no concealment of their Christian faith. One need only name Foch and Haig in the first war, Wavell and Montgomery in the second ; to whom many others might be added but for the fact that the mention of some might seem to exclude others whose beliefs, if equally well known, would be seen to be equally firm.

We have therefore to rebuild from the foundations, and here I think a society such as ours is called to take its part. We are a society largely of laymen, and therefore should escape the depreciation with which the Bishop of Birmingham lightly dismisses the writers of his own cloth. But if our testimony is to carry weight, we must show that we are not rooted in out-of-date traditions ; that we are ready to meet critics on their own ground. But we have a right to claim that we should be met on equal terms—that our opponents should not, like the Bishop of Birmingham, lightly beg one of the questions at issue by assuming that miracles do not happen, and therefore that all the stories of miracles in the Gospels are fictitious. “ If Christ, as thou affirmest, be of man, mere man and nothing more ” . . . such an argument may have its plausibility. But what if He is not mere man and nothing more, which is the point at issue ? The Bishop does not seem to see that his own attitude is as uncritical as that of the obscurantist that he treads upon.

It is on these grounds and in this spirit that I hope the Institute will carry out the mission which it undertook eighty-three years ago. But some of those who may feel that they can play no part in the re-establishment of our shattered material civilisation

may be assured that both in their private life and as members of the Victoria Institute they can make their contribution to that moral revival on which the future welfare of humanity yet more totally depends.