

Evangelism and the Church

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THIS is the first meeting of the Oxford Conference of Evangelical Churchmen since April, 1939, and it is the first held at Wycliffe Hall. On the last occasion we met, as in former years, at St. Peter's Hall under the presidency of the Master, the Reverend C. M. Chavasse. And to-night it is my happy privilege to welcome him in our midst as one of the speakers at this Conference, and to tell him in the name of all of you how delighted we are that he has been called to the Episcopate, and that his gifts of energy, courage and comradeship, which made him so well known and loved in this city and University, have already made their mark in the diocese of Rochester, in spite of the terrible handicap with which he has had to contend. To-morrow also we shall have the pleasure of welcoming the Bishop of Chelmsford, who was the first Chairman of this Conference in the days when it met in Cheltenham.

This is also the first meeting of the Conference since the outbreak of the war which has become world-wide and devastating beyond all comparison. In spite of the difficulties of transport and catering, our Committee has thought it right to call us together to consider the spiritual condition and needs of our country in this time of war, and the responsibility before God that lies upon the Church of England in particular to bear witness to the one Hope of the world. It does not require much imagination to perceive the relevance of our subject, "Evangelism," to the present situation. After two and three-quarter years of war we have seen nothing that can be called a revival of spiritual life in this country. The response to His Majesty's summons of the nation to prayer and the impression made by "the miracle of Dunkirk" have been sporadic rather than permanent in their effect. There have been many hindrances to the maintenance of the normal worship and work of the Church—the restrictions of the black-out, the wholesale evacuation of children and other members of the regular congregations, the encroachment of war work and national service, especially in the Home-guard, on the sacredness of Sunday, and the destruction by enemy action of churches and parish halls. More dangerous and destructive of spiritual values have been the subtle influences which war disseminates, the relaxing of discipline in home and school, the new temptations which swollen incomes bring, the loosening of moral sanctions within and without the Forces, the artificial reactions of war-weariness and nervous strain. All this has brought upon some of the clergy a spirit of pessimism and defeat. They despair of recovering the ordered round of Church worship and organisation: the parochial system is for them a memory of the past. A diocesan Bishop recently said that he never expected a morning congregation of more than sixty people when he preached in his city churches.

But that is only one side of the picture. On the other there is ground for encouragement and thanksgiving. Many churches are as crowded as ever; in this city some are better attended than they were before the war. Generally in the country there is a friendly feeling towards the clergy who have been brought into close touch with the people through their work in shelters, in A.R.P. depots and in other war-time associations. There is a deepening interest in definitely religious education, and in spite of the destruction of so many churches the contributions to Christian causes both at home and abroad have been maintained at a high level. Reports from Naval, Army and R.A.F. Chaplains vary just as the Chaplains vary in character and efficiency. While there is often resentment against forced attendance at parade services, there is friendliness towards the padre and an obvious desire to know what Christianity has to say. The impression which I have gained from the recent letters of a large number of Wycliffe men serving as Chaplains is that the opportunities are great, especially with the troops abroad, and that they like and admire the men. One of them writes from Iraq, "Ever since I left England I have had a most encouraging time. I have found an increasing interest in religion and a desire to learn more. At a discussion group on the voyage out the attendance averaged eighty and there was never any lack of speakers." He goes on to tell how Bishop Graham-Brown recently held a Confirmation service at which he presented eighty-eight candidates and another Wycliffe padre sixty-five. So there are causes for joy as well as anxiety. This is a day of need and of opportunity.

It falls to the reader of the next paper to deal more fully with the diagnosis of the present situation, so far as it reveals the World's need. My task is to consider the Church's attitude and response to the present opportunity. And at this point I would remind myself and you of the purpose of this Conference. If I interpret it aright, it is not to report upon, and make recommendations for the improvement of, the present position of any department of our Church's life or work. Rather, it is to review the principles which lie at the foundation of our Christian faith and practice, that we may catch again a vision of God's purpose for the world which He has created and redeemed, and in the light of that vision may like Isaiah of old be cleansed and consecrated anew to the service of that holy purpose. We draw up and publish findings at the close in order that we may share that rediscovery with others. So in this year we are summoned to review the fundamental principles of Evangelism, and my share of the task, as I see it, is to examine the relation of the Church to the Gospel. And I propose to do this by setting before you three propositions to consider and discuss.

(1) *That the Church is the product of the Gospel.* She is the creation of the life-giving Spirit through the Word, "having been begotten again . . . through the word of God, which liveth and abideth . . . And this is the word of good tidings which was preached unto you." (I Pet. i. 23, 25). This means that we think of the Church not primarily as a great institution but as a living organism, animated and controlled by the free, sovereign, creative Spirit of God, Whose relation to the Body of Christ which He indwells is always to be thought of in terms

of personal influence, not of mechanical operation. And that He deals with us as moral personalities is implied by the means that He uses, the Word, which quickens our consciences and influences our wills by way of our understanding.

And the passage quoted above from St. Peter's first Epistle shows clearly that the Word means the preached message of the Gospel. This meaning of course is closely linked with that secondary meaning in accordance with which we speak of the Scriptures as "the Word of God." For they are the record and interpretation of God's message which He gave first 'unto the fathers in the prophets,' and more completely 'in His Son' and in His apostles. It is for this reason that the second paper tomorrow morning, when we shall consider the content of the Gospel or Evangel, is entitled "God's written word."

If then the Church is the product of the Gospel, it follows that the view which gives to the Church an authority that is superior to that of the Word is based on a fallacy. Just because the writers of the New Testament were members of the Christian Church, it has been argued that the Church produced the Bible. But the Doctrinal Commission's Report (on page 113) rightly exposes that fallacy when it says that "the Gospel contained in Scripture is in no sense the work of the Church, though of necessity it rested with the Church to decide what writings authentically contain it." St. John the Divine did not write as the spokesman of the Church: he was commissioned of God to write "what the Spirit saith to the churches."

And there is a practical corollary to this first proposition, that the Church is the product of the Gospel, which is all-important to-day as always. It is that the Gospel is needed in the Church both for the unconverted and for the faithful, that is both unto justification and unto sanctification. I must take these two needs in turn.

First, the Gospel needs to be preached to the unconverted people in the Church. One of the greatest hindrances to the spread of Christ's Kingdom on earth is the inconsistency of professing Christians. God knows how greatly each of us offends, and how far we come short of real saintliness: but we are to a large measure conscious of our failure, and repent of it. There is a multitude, however, of baptised and even confirmed members of the Church who are not sorry for their inconsistency: they are not aware of it, or they have no desire to be like Christ, just because they have never really known Him. As Dr. J. H. Oldham has put it, "All existing Churches are in greater or less degree mixed bodies. They cannot exclude from membership those who are in need of instruction, education, help and healing. There is an inescapable tension between the holiness of the Church and the universality of its mission and ministry. The Church has an actual existence in history, and is real only in its actual historical embodiments. But we cannot attribute to these mixed bodies the characteristics of the true Church of Christ, or expect from them in their corporate capacity the action which can rightly be demanded from those who have committed themselves whole-heartedly to Christian discipleship. . . . Within the Church as an organised society the true Church has to be continually re-created, and to find new embodiment in the faith and obedience and devotion of those who hear and respond to the voice of Christ." And for this continued re-creation there is only one

power, the power of the Spirit through the Word. Therefore, brethren, we will preach the Gospel frankly and deliberately in our churches that men and women, and children too, may be converted to God.

And secondly the Gospel needs to be preached to the faithful in the Church. For it is the good tidings of the grace of God which is received by faith, the grace that makes forgiveness possible and the faith that makes it actual. And both ultimately are God's gift. As the new Archbishop of Canterbury has expressed it, "All is of God; the only thing of my very own which I can contribute to my own redemption is the sin from which I need to be redeemed." Our Reformers were right in giving such prominence in the Articles to Justification by Faith, for it is the basic doctrine of man's salvation. And I believe that much of the flabbiness and ineffectiveness of our so-called Evangelical preaching to-day can be traced to the lack of the understanding and experience of that truth which was the dynamic of the message of Wesley, and Luther and St. Paul. Only in the knowledge of God's free, generous love, shown in the cross of Jesus Christ,—love so utterly undeserved and unimagined—and in the assurance of forgiveness that comes with it, can the soul of man enter into that full, spontaneous relationship with God, which St. Paul calls "the liberty of the sons of God." Henceforth his life is one glad response of gratitude to the Lord who has won his heart's devotion. It is a life of faith, "from faith unto faith," for sanctification as for justification. And heart's devotion needs to be fed with the message of the grace of God.

This leads us directly to the second proposition.

(2) *That the Church is the trustee of the Gospel*—and that in both senses in which Timothy was charged to 'guard the deposit,' and to 'do the work of an evangelist.' Everyone who knows in experience that "the Gospel is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth" must realise that he cannot keep it to himself, but that like St. Paul he is a debtor, both to the cultured and the ignorant pagans around him. For we have to face the fact that conditions in the so-called Christian countries are now closely akin to those in the mission field. Shall we regard this fact as a ground for feeble self-excuse and a defeatist attitude, and not rather as a challenge and a stimulus, as our fathers did in the early days of the Evangelical Revival? Here is the Church's opportunity: but it can only be met with their single-hearted loyalty to Christ, and their passion for souls.

Only like souls I see the folk thereunder,

Bound who should conquer, slaves who should be kings,

Hearing their one hope with an empty wonder,

Sadly contented in a show of things:—

Then with a rush the intolerable craving

Shivers throughout me like a trumpet call,

Oh to save these! to perish for their saving,

Die for their life, be offered for them all! (F. W. H. Myers).

"Yea, woe is unto me, if I preach not the Gospel."

Tomorrow morning we pass on to consider the nature of that Gospel. Here I anticipate only to say that we shall agree, I know, that it must be a full Gospel, a Scriptural Gospel, and a relevant Gospel—

a *full* Gospel because nothing less will satisfy,—‘the whole counsel of God,’ not a repetition of trite shibboleths worn thin, but the full message of God as Father, Saviour and living Spirit ;

a *Scriptural* Gospel, because that alone will carry conviction of truth and form an integrated and balanced whole, with the New Testament firmly based on the Old, and the Epistles properly related to the Gospels,—and (may I hope) Scriptural, not merely because it quotes proof texts but in the profounder sense that it observes those proportions which reverent scholarship has brought to our understanding of the Bible ;

and a *relevant* Gospel, that applies to the kind of predicament in which men find themselves to-day, and thereby meets their real needs.

And here let us remember that a considerable part of men’s felt needs to-day is focussed in their life as members of a community, and they are asking what the Church has to say about that. This is where the Bishop of Chelmsford’s subject tomorrow on the Regeneration of Society fills an important role. We do not want the so-called ‘social Gospel,’ but we do need a Gospel for society, as well as for the individual.

So much in our organised Church life seems archaic and irrelevant to modern thought. The clergy themselves often appear to live a life apart, and so the impression deepens that religion is just a hobby for those who like it. This tendency further underlines the necessity for lay evangelism, which is already patent in the fact that the work has far outdistanced the capacity of the clergy. By lay evangelism I do not mean only the co-operation of trained lay workers or of ecclesiastically-minded laymen, though there is a place for both : but I mean the sharing of this great responsibility by the men and women who are carrying on the ordinary affairs of life in home and school, in office and factory. We can find illustrations of this Christian witness to-day in the Services. And here I should like to pay a special tribute to some members of the “Oxford Group Movement,” who as I know from personal testimony are setting a fine example of lay evangelism in the fighting forces. It is extraordinary that the rise of a new Movement should be required to emphasise a truth that was clear to the early Church, that as the gift of the Spirit was for all its members, so also was the privilege of witness. One reason why this truth has been forgotten is that the clergy have failed to teach the third and last proposition, namely,

(3) *That the Church is part of the Gospel.* This I believe to be true in two senses.

(a) first, because it is an object of faith, not a human device, but God’s gift to the world. That is why we recite in the Creed, “I believe in the holy Catholic Church.” In other words, as the Doctrinal Commission’s Report says “the Church is for Christians an object not only of sight, but of spiritual discernment and insight. It emerges in history, but it is essentially a Fellowship, constituted by a relation between God and Man, which in the last resort must be discerned and apprehended by faith . . . it is bound up with that Gospel entrusted to it in such a sense that to accept the Gospel in its fulness must involve membership in that Community, so that the Church is part of its own creed.”

This view is not perhaps widely recognised or taught by Evangelical Churchmen, but I believe that it is essentially true. We are saved as individuals, but we are saved into the fellowship of the redeemed society. And this is to be part of our message. "We preach not ourselves," writes St. Paul to the Corinthians, "but Christ Jesus as Lord." But he adds at once "and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake." Yes, Christ is the centre of our message, but we are involved in it, because we are His Body, carrying on His work in the world. This is a truth that is needed to-day in a world in which rival views of community life are contending for the mastery. The Tambaram Conference demonstrated undeniably that the Christian Church is an international society overcoming all barriers of race and colour, of class and sex. To the founding and building up of these young churches Evangelicals have contributed so much in the past. Shall we fail to learn the lesson of their maturer development? In that case we shall only have ourselves to blame, if men regard us as good pioneers, but poor consolidators, able to evangelise but not to edify.

(b) and the Church is part of the Gospel, because the Christian message is truth through personality. That is the meaning of the Incarnation. "As the Father hath sent Me, even so send I you." We are experiments as well as exponents of the Gospel, and our lives often speak louder than our lips. Like St. Paul we have sometimes to bid men be imitators not only of God, but of us. This is our truly "awful" responsibility. What manner of men ought we to be!

Here is the point at which the last division of our subject at this Conference becomes relevant and urgent. The question of Reunion has always been one of the main interests of the Conference of Evangelical Churchmen since the days of its inception at Cheltenham. But it has not for that reason been dragged in to our present programme. It is vital to the Church's God-given commission to evangelise. In His wonderful High-priestly prayer for the Church our Lord prayed that they all might be one, that the world might believe. And unity, like charity, should begin at home. Recently there has been a good deal of correspondence in the 'Record' on the question of unity among Evangelicals, and the first paper at tomorrow night's session will be devoted to this most important matter. Our "present unhappy divisions" are, I believe, nothing less than a device of the devil, to prevent us from doing the work to which our Master has called us. But Evangelism is also the practical remedy for disunion. Hence Reunion can be regarded as a Fruit of Evangelism. As the experience of the Churches on the Continent has reminded us in recent years, it is when we stand together against the attacks of the common foe that we find that we are brothers in arms. Yet we must not forget that unity cannot be manufactured by men. As Dr. Visser T'hooft wrote in his book on the Church, in preparation for the World Conference on Church, Community and State, held in Oxford in 1937, "It is with unity as with all the gifts of God: we can prepare for it, we can pray for it, we can watch for it, but we cannot bring it into being."

Neither can we command the day of spiritual awakening, or fix the date of revival. Elijah could not command the fire from heaven on Mount Carmel. But like him we can prepare for its coming.

Elijah called the people to the mountain of decision, and we can make clear the moral and spiritual issues that face our people to-day. Elijah built again the altar of Jehovah that was fallen down, and laid the wood in order and the bullock for sacrifice. We too can set the Lord always before us and renew the consecration of our whole lives to Him. We also can wait upon God and pray for the fire from heaven, even as Elijah at the time of the evening sacrifice lifted up his voice and prayed "Hear me, O Lord, hear me, that this people may know that Thou, Lord, art God, and that Thou hast turned their heart back again." Then the fire of the Lord fell.

The Failure of Humanism

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THOSE who are about to sit for examinations frequently receive some such counsel as this: "In a certain type of question, before you really begin the discussion, make sure that you have so defined the terms in which the question is set that both you and the examiner will really know what you are talking about. An adequate definition of terms is often the accomplishment of half your task."

To discuss the 'failure of humanism' is to attempt an answer to a question of precisely this type, and, at least for the clarification of my own mind, if no one else's, it will be well if I begin by practising what I have so often preached to others, namely by attempting some definition of 'Humanism' from which it will be possible to advance to an examination of the origins and history of Humanism as an intellectual and spiritual force, to probe the nature and causes of its failure, and so, I hope, to prepare in some measure for the lines of constructive action with which as Christian evangelists we are concerned. For 'humanism' is a protean monster, and it is all-important to decide with which of its changing shapes we are dealing here.

The Oxford English Dictionary provides four such definitions or explanations of the term, and these (or rather the third and fourth of them combined) will come near to giving us what we want, though we may, in passing, slightly regret the fact that 'H' comes early in the alphabet and consequently that particular volume of the Dictionary is already fairly old. The term has not remained wholly static in the last forty years, and the inclusion of modern instances of its use (since the rise of Barthianism, for example) would have been of real value.

The first Dictionary definition (of 'Humanism' with a capital 'H') is "belief in the mere Humanity of Christ." Somewhat fortunately, in the interests of clarity, this use of the term as equivalent to Psilanthropism never became common, and is now obsolete. It is not primarily with Christology but rather with the Christian Doctrine of Man that the explorer of Humanism has to do, though again we may observe in passing that even this obsolete use of the term is not without significance for us. Nestorianism and Pelagianism are justly linked