

THE BEST MEANS FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF SPIRITUAL AND EVANGELICAL RELIGION IN THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND

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To begin with, we are powerless in this matter, and shall not advance a step till we feel and acknowledge it. Spiritual and Evangelical Religion is the work of God's Spirit on man's spirit by the Gospel. "Salvation is of the Lord." Waves of spiritual life ebb and flow. We cannot command the Spirit and yet we can do nothing without Him. "The wind bloweth where it listeth." God will have our Church know before he blesses her that the blessing is altogether from Himself. "Not by power nor by might, but by my Spirit, saith the Lord of Hosts." Now Gideon's fleece is wet with the dew while the floor on which it lies is dry, and now damp is the stone and dry is the fleece, for the Spirit is free and sovereign in His visitations. A humble Church will be a blessed Church. Let our wants and woes drive us to our knees. There is such a thing as not coming low enough to be blessed. Hence, too, prayer for the Spirit's out-pouring must underlie all our efforts: in our own utter helplessness we must grasp the Almighty hand; "let him lay hold of My strength," must have for its response "I will not let thee go except thou bless me." But what practical steps can we take to advance Spiritual and Evangelical Religion in our Church? We are all agreed that it is needed. Whether a little more or a little less,—whether advancing, or stationary, or retrograding—it is certainly far too small to satisfy those who would see our Jerusalem a praise in the earth. No doubt the tide of Evangelical Religion has risen many feet and carried the vessel much forward since this century begun, but instead of still rising it seems now to pause or even ebb, and the vessel is left stranded. Oh! for a mighty flood of spiritual influence that would bear our stranded Church right out into a sea of usefulness! And how can we hope to obtain it? The question would be more difficult had we not the light of the past to guide us. We can look back and trace out the rapid rise of Spiritual and Evangelical Religion in our Church:—it was the work of a few, who could count upon their fingers the names of those who were preaching Christ in their day. What was the secret of their success? if we can ascertain it, we may try it again and hope for like results.

I.—It seems to me that their success lay very much in their real felt, marked separation from the world, in its amusements, associations, and forms of religion. They "went forth unto Jesus without the camp, bearing his reproach" more than we do. Once the Evangelical body despised the world and contemned alike its pleasures and its frowns; but now are not the chains of worldly fashion upon us? Is not our spiritual life eaten up with questionable amusements and conformities? The line of separation is scarcely visible, and the professed people of God are so mixed up with the sons of men that you cannot discern the one from the other. And do not worldly men infer that our religion is only a fiction? We are tolerated at the expense of being despised, and we leave no solemn impression of God behind us. Men applaud the fleshly mortifications and labours of Ritualists and Romanists because we fail to show them the true spirit of self-denial. If we would put forth real power, we need to look to ourselves in this matter: Am I slothful and wasteful of time? Am I worldly, associating myself with men who cannot, by any possibility, profit me? Am I seen where my Master would not be welcome? Do I love amusements which can afford me no comfort to reflect on, and which I should never indulge in if I thought that Christ would come while I was in them? Am I as showy, as volatile, as frivolous as men and women of the world? And then, are we covetous? Has the love of money taken the place of the love of Christ? Is our first thought not how we may honour God, but how we may accumulate wealth? Let us be careful how we enter the world, for gain or pleasure, under pretence of being missionaries. There cannot be a more unpromising place than worldly society for a man who has a spark of religion in him to enter, if he

wishes to keep it still burning. If it were very warm and bright he would not venture there; but those who have least religion to lose are most ready to thrust it into danger. When Christian parents have families springing up, daughters to be married off, and sons to be started in life, the temptation to worldly conformity is strong, it fills one at times with a kind of despair to see how those who profess to regard spiritual religion as all important, subordinate it to almost everything in life; how educational accomplishments and choice of pursuits and friendships and alliances are discussed and fixed without this once entering into serious consideration.—This is one great reason why Spiritual and Evangelical Religion makes so little progress, and why Christian families are constantly melting away into the worldliness around them—simpler habits, more self-denial, visible separation from the world, would do much to restore to the Evangelical body their olden power in the land.

II.—Again it seems, to me, that their success lay very much in their all-consuming zeal, their all-subduing travail for souls—Read the sermons of Wesley and Whitfield, and what is there in them? Perhaps they seem scarcely worthy to have survived, and yet those sermons wrought marvels? And why? Because these men were soul-seekers and soul-winners; their inmost self was love to souls and they threw themselves into their sermons—it was the tearful eye, and glowing countenance, the pleading tone, the bursting heart—these things could not be printed, and these are what we want if Evangelical religion is to advance—God does not give conversions to eloquence but to heart; truth *from* the heart goes *to* the heart. This is God's battle-axe and weapon of war. He is pleased to use the yearnings, longings, and sympathies of Christian men far more than polished sentences or even orthodox statements. God send us men who will weep their eyes out over sinners, who will agonize with God for conversions; and then it is not Ritualism or Rationalism either that shall withstand us.

Those who do a work for Christ are those who suffer "great heaviness and continual sorrow of heart" for sinners. How would a dozen or two of importunate pleaders and lovers of souls shake this land from end to end! but "iniquity abounds and the love of the many waxes cold." There was a time perhaps when you would have done anything to bring a man to Christ, but you are not so ready to speak for Jesus now as you once were. Does the tear tremble in your eye now, as it once did for lost souls, perishing, without Christ? Alas! upon how many of us has a freezing influence operated. And this is true of us Ministers. We have grown professional in our services, and, for the most part, we preach like automatons, which are wound up for a sermon, to run down when the discourse is over. Trifles of criticism, fancies of speculation, or flowers of oratory fascinate too many who should be wise to win souls.

We want more intense earnestness; not of excited natural feeling, but of God's indwelling Spirit. The Church is spiritually "a barren woman" without it, whilst with it, she becomes "a joyful mother of children." "As soon as Zion travailed, she brought forth her children."

III.—But once more looking back to those giants of other days, who wrought much wonders in our Church, we may see a great secret of their success in their more simple and entire confidence in the Gospel. *They* had a Creed. They could say, "I believe and therefore speak," and if we are to advance Spiritual and Evangelical religion, we must not be men who believe nothing, or anything, or everything by turns; we must hold God's truth with an iron grasp. There is a Protestantism still worth contending for, there are distinctive doctrines of Grace still worth proclaiming, and a Gospel worth dying for. There is such a thing as Spiritual Evangelical religion, as distinguished from Ritualism, or Rationalism, or Legalism, and let us make it known that we believe in it. These are not days to be frightened at cries of sectarianism and bigotry: if we would prevail, we must believe in our hearts what we profess to believe, and proclaim openly and zealously what we know to be the truth. Let us not be ashamed to say this is truth, and let men draw the inference that the opposite is falsehood. Let us display our banner, and let it be that which the Church carried of old; unfurl the old primitive standard, the all-victorious standard of the cross of Christ. "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up." As I read the lives of

those good soldiers of Christ who won the early victories of the Gospel in our Church, nothing so strikes me as their greater confidence in the atonement as the great conquering truth which was "to subdue the people under them." We cannot place too much reliance on the simple Gospel; our weakness is that we are so diffident, and so apt to look elsewhere for strength. Too often we preach the Gospel as if we were afraid. What! are we God's messengers, and shall we crouch to the sons of men to ask them what message they would like best? Because men of the world despise the Gospel, and philosophers, "falsely so called," tell us that science has overthrown it, and because Ritualism is popular we need to be all the more resolute, and to say to men, though it be platitude to you, and you declare it to be contemptible, you shall have it or nothing else from us, for "it is the power of God and the wisdom of God." Let us still continue, God helping us, preaching "the foolishness of the Gospel," and deliver again and again the old truth that "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them," that "by grace are ye saved through faith and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God." Salvation is by free favour through the expiatory sacrifice of Jesus our Lord. The very plague and bane of the Evangelical body in our Church is going down to Egypt for help. Instead of simply meeting all the attractions and solicitations of Ritualism with a fuller, freer, bolder preaching of the Gospel, there has been a too general attempt to take more than one leaf out of the Ritualists' book, to keep pace with them, and copy everything that seems innocent in their system. More music, more ornate services, more church decorations, shorter sermons, and altogether a far larger number of small imitations than we are well aware of.

There has been a leaning on these things, instead of a simple and firm reliance on that great Spiritual power which we have and they have not. How foolish as well as faithless is this! The bird that wished to outstrip us would not attempt to run by our ride, but would use its own swift wings. We have the strong wings of a great eagle, and shall we instead of mounting up with them run a weary foot race with these men who have none? We may court and foster a taste for these ornate and gothic services, but remember we can never successfully compete with Ritualists in ministering to the taste.

I fear that an entire acceptance of the Gospel, a real knowledge of it, a sure confidence in it, is more rare than we think. "The weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but they are mighty!" Evangelical religion is perfectly spiritual, it thrusts nothing between the sinner and his Saviour, and that received into our own hearts and put before others will tell, we do not want anything besides the Gospel. This is the remedy we believe in, let others choose sweet music or pictures, or vestments or human rites—as for us it is to the preaching of Christ crucified that we look for the saving of souls and of our Church too. There is a great rage for Conferences and all sorts of plans and new expedients are discussed, I see no need of any new instrument: is not the preached Gospel enough? All we need now is more Spiritual influence accompanying it. The preaching which moves one heart today needs not to be altered to tell upon a thousand tomorrow. With God's Spirit our present instrumentalities will suffice to win the world for Christ, without Him ten thousand times as much apparent force would be only so much weakness. Therefore, I would say to advance Spiritual and Evangelical Religion in the Church of England, "Preach the word; be instant in season and out of season; for the time will come when men will not endure sound doctrine." Oh! let us use no other harp and let our fingers never leave its strings;—the harp whose strings vibrate to the name of Jesus only, and let us not fear that it will not be sweetest music in men's ears; spiritual life will awaken at the sound, and spiritual life can never be bound down by chains of formalism. The seed whose hidden life begins to stir within soon bursts and throws aside its dark, hard, dead case which can contain it no more. When the butterfly has once spread its soft wings to the air and the sunshine, no power of man can ever enclose them in the chrysalis again.—And those who are called forth into the glorious liberty of the children of God will not become sacramentarians or formalists.

One word more. There are some who seem to think that Spiritual and Evangelical Religion can best be advanced within the Church of England by withdrawing from her in a solemn protest

against error. I cannot see it so. Should we not rather imitate our Lord. He taught in the temple and He cleansed it. That temple was as corrupt as ever our Church can be, and His foreseeing eye saw how vain would all attempts at reformation prove, yet He taught in it and cleansed it, not once but twice.

We cannot see the future. Our efforts may yet be crowned with success. At any rate, let us teach in the temple and let us cleanse it:—the result may be with us as it was with our Master, we may be cast out of the temple, and then the Lord will give it to others; but let us not court defeat by anticipating it. And let it not be said of us that being armed with the Gospel of Christ and “carrying the bow of the Spirit,” we turned back in the day of battle.