Evangelicalism in the Church of England To-day

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THE Editor of The Churchman has set me a difficult task, for I fear that it is impossible to write honestly on this subject without treading on someone's corns. But my object in this article is simply to write from a personal point of view and to express my own convictions. No one is responsible for what I write but myself. My particular point of view has developed through more than thirty years in the C.M.S. at home and abroad, and over eight years as a Diocesan Bishop.

I

Before we can examine the problems that present themselves, we must go back into the origins of what we now call Evangelicalism. I need not look back further than the Evangelical Revival, when this nation-wide spiritual awakening stirred the conscience of people in this land as nothing else has done from that day to this. It was the fresh presentation of the Evangel in the power of the Spirit that brought about this awakening. Because the Gospel was the one theme, people applied the word Evangelical to those who led the movement. An Evangelical was one who preached the Gospel, one who had a message he wished to share with all the world. I cannot stress this fact too strongly, because it was the message thus preached that turned this nation upside down. It brought in its train all kinds of social reforms, and it carried the Gospel to the ends of the earth. It is surely correct to say that the revival never began in any party way. It was a message to the Church, and through it to the nation and to the world.

Somervell in his book *A Short History of our Religion* remarks that " Three-quarters of the religious energy generated for the next hundred years, both within the Church and among the dissenting Churches, can be traced back to it " (the Evangelical Revival). He goes on to explain that while England was awakening spiritually, in the same period in France Voltaire was attacking Christianity itself with a power and effect unknown in previous centuries. England was probably saved from revolution by this Revival. France was to make war on us, but again it is fair to say that many thousands of people had found a new spiritual life that became a bulwark against an invading atheism. Harrison, in his book *The Evangelical Revival and Christian Reunion*, says that " When a revival of religion shakes the land, one of the truths that is quickly demonstrated is that the Lord has poured out His Spirit as a free gift ' upon all flesh '. The experiences of the Day of Pentecost repeat themselves, and the Church, rediscovering its lost youth, walks in the morning light of Apostolic days ".

It would be a mistake for us to imagine that these spiritual awaken-

ings that took place in Germany, America, Britain and elsewhere were simply sporadic human happenings. There is much more in these movements than appears on the surface. The Moravians in Herrnhut in South Germany sent out their missionaries to America, and a few of these itinerant evangelists began a revival movement that swept all before it. John Wesley was strongly influenced by a Moravian missionary. We therefore see strange things happening in different parts of the world. But the story really begins in Germany in 1727 when the Moravians were attending a Holy Communion service in their Saxony village one Sunday morning, and the Holy Spirit fell upon the congregation. There has been a concerted work of the Holy Spirit in these widely different countries and revival has followed. It has been the Holy Spirit working out a divine plan and raising up witnesses for God in an age of moral corruption.

From this follows another striking fact. Churchmen of all types, whose hearts God has touched, united happily in this revival. The "Holy Club" at Oxford had High Churchmen within its ranks who worked happily with others. The fact that they were strict in fasting, that they spoke of the Holy Communion as a sacrifice and that they taught a doctrine of the Real Presence did not drive them out of the fellowship. They kept the Saints' Days and taught a doctrine of apostolic succession, and yet they found that they could work with other churchmen who differed widely from them! It is facts like these that go to show that within the Revivalist ranks all schools of thought in the Church could work in complete accord. They prayed together for the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, and they practised this in their fellowship with one another. They developed their theology of the grace of God. They gloried in the Cross and preached God's free forgiveness for sin through the merits of a crucified Saviour. They found a personal experience of God's love and they went everywhere proclaiming that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself. One outstanding feature of the Revival was the way its leaders sought to make the Holy Communion the central service of the Church, and to restore it in worship to the place it had lost in the Middle Ages. The records show that the early Evangelicals held more frequent Holy Communion services, that the numbers attending these services grew by leaps and bounds as the movement spread. The reason was that people newly converted quickly grasped the Evangelical significance of this chief service of the Church.

It was thus through the Evangelical Revival that the Church preserved its true character of being Catholic in the sense of the English Reformation. The Church of England to them was Catholic but reformed. It was reformed but Catholic. The early Evangelicals rediscovered old and neglected truths. But they never claimed to teach anything that was not the inheritance of the whole Church. It was for this reason that they did not seek at first to be a party. They certainly were not a 'sect' within the Church. They were in fact part of the Church Catholic in the same sense that all members of the Church of England are members. They placed special emphasis on certain doctrines, but they were doctrines recognised as orthodox by the whole Church. Their differentiation was their emphasis on the

grace and power of God to save from sin, on justification by faith and the sanctifying power of the Spirit, in a period when the Church had become cold, ineffective and in places almost moribund.

As we study the early days of the Evangelicals within the Church of England, there rises before us an illustration of what has happened so often in history. In any age when the Church has become static God has raised up men who through His Spirit rediscover these forgotten truths. A breath of God was felt in our land through the Holy Club under Wesley at Oxford. Tutors, graduates and others were drawn into fellowship to help the undergraduates. The Evangelicals owed their inspiration to Wesley, and they permeated the Church of England with their message until they became the most powerful grouping within our Church. As so often happens, the fires eventually grew dim and the movement hardened into a party within the Church. Many efforts since those days have been made to revive the Church by its Evangelical message but the results have always been very meagre. Evangelistic movements such as the Moody and Sankey missions in England did bring back for a time much of the old fire, and the many thousands of converts resulting from the work of our American visitors gave to all the churches a new lay leadership which carried us on until about the end of the nineteenth century and possibly beyond. But to sum up this section of my article, the Evangelical movement was a thing of God to quicken the whole life of the Church. It had a special mission to fulfil. I feel that it lost much of its power by ultimately adopting a party plan of campaign and by an isolationist policy that made it difficult for its members to work with other schools of thought within the Church. The early co-operation with other types of Churchmen was lost in a somewhat narrow fundamentalism. From then to now the Evangelicals have lost ground within the Church. To-day the divisive influences that separated some Churchmen so acutely from others have invaded the ranks of Evangelicals themselves. They too have split into Conservative Evangelicals and Liberal Evangelicals. Many of us who are proud to own that grand old word Evangelical are saddened by these unhappy divisions in a school of thought that has had such a wonderful influence upon both the Church and the nation.

II

What is actually happening at present is that many Churchmen, whose views are moderate, who should find among the Evangelicals their spiritual home, are put off by what they discover and decide that they will be simply "Churchmen", without any party labels. There is also a great deal of Evangelical zeal and faith among many of the younger Anglo-Catholics. The Evangelical message is being proclaimed, moreover, most faithfully by many who will not subscribe to any party formula at all, and it may well be that as the tide turns and new spiritual life is breathed back into the Church, we shall find again the basis of a new fellowship of the Gospel, altogether bigger than the various schools of thought, whether Evangelical, Catholic or Liberal. Will revival ever come to our Church unless clergy and people of all points of view are prepared to work together, to be tolerant to one

another and to make allowance for differences that need not break their harmony and mutual co-operation?

Let me give one illustration of the sort of difficulty some of us find who really are Evangelically minded. Some years ago I, along with others, was asked to join in an effort to bring Conservative and Liberal Evangelicals together. The hope was expressed by those who were leading this effort that, by a united discussion, the way might be paved for closer collaboration between the two sections of Evangelical thought. After discussion one man rose to define an Evangelical. He said that he thought a real Evangelical was one who would never take the Eastward position in the Holy Communion. He argued that a statement should be issued, making it clear that only those who took the north side should be recognised as Evangelicals. This naturally led to further discussion when it was pointed out that many who sincerely call themselves Evangelicals do take the Eastward position. In fact, there are probably more convinced Evangelicals to-day taking what we call E.P. than those who stick resolutely to the north side. Another member of the group stated definitely that he and those who thought as he did could not work with such obscurantists! The cleavage seemed wider than ever. The effort was finally abandoned and the two wings of Evangelicals agreed to go their own separated ways. Is it any wonder that labels adopted by different schools of thought are being discredited by a large body of clergy?

One point Evangelicals must clear up among themselves is whether it is more important to emphasise the secondary things that split Evangelicals, or to recapture the message that gave them once so famous a place in the Church's life. What I mean is, does it really matter whether we stand at the north side or in the eastward position? Does it really matter whether some are more fundamentalist than others? Are we not being called in these dangerous days to put first things first: to give priority to the message and to let the party spirit sink into a very secondary place?

The danger we face as Evangelicals to-day is that having placed so much emphasis on party loyalties, or if you will, upon the differences of the Evangelical schools of thought, we are likely to find some day that we have gained a fine collection of husks, and have lost the good wheat. One thing is certain—Evangelicals have no monopoly of this message. It belongs to the whole Church. It is something embedded in the teaching of the entire New Testament. It is nothing less than God's revelation of Himself in Christ and His word to man concerning His salvation. It seems at times as though our emphasis on ritual is more important than our message of grace. This of course is a generalisation, but it may set us thinking, because so much depends upon our attitude of mind. What is our real objective? Is it to safeguard and to preserve Evangelicalism, or is it to make the Evangel a living, vital factor in the Church of to-day? St. Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians describes the party factions within a small local Church. "I am of Paul", "I am of Apollos", "I am of Peter", they said. If St. Paul had taken a party point of view and adopted any one section in the Corinthian Church, he would have split it irrevocably. It must have been a big temptation to him to accept

those who said they belonged to a Pauline party and to work through them. But no, he saw that the only thing that mattered was the Church and its message. He therefore scorned their party strife and was big-hearted enough to let the Church of Corinth embrace all schools of thought, provided that they were prepared to accept the faith of Christ crucified, the love that never fails and the fact of the Resurrection. His priorities were clear. He fought for one Church that could proclaim a message with converting power to the great mass of pagan people in Corinth.

Now let us transfer this thought to to-day. There is a growing body of the clergy, as I have said, both inside and outside the Evangelical ranks who refuse to be labelled in any way except that they are loyal sons of the Church. Lay people to-day, sensing the situation, turn to them much more readily on the whole than to anyone of a particular school of thought. There is therefore growing up in the Church a central bloc of Churchmen who refuse to keep within the limits of one tradition or another, who seek to proclaim the one Gospel, to stand firmly for the Church of England in both its Catholic and reformed position, who are loyal to the Prayer Book and who make Christ central in all their teaching. If Evangelicals can read the signs of the times they will, I think, sense that something like a silent revolution is taking place within our old historic Church. Lay people are not in the least interested in the old party slogans. They are moving with the times and in the end they will shape the future of the Church, probably by driving out a good many things imposed on them by the clergy, and by seeking a real unity throughout the Church that will restore us all to a new loyalty to our Church and its standard of worship.

III

Looking back on what I have written, it seems to me that Evangelicals were raised up in a period of grave crisis and peril to our people, to summon the nation back to God. For many years they fulfilled that mission in humble dependence upon the Holy Spirit. As time passed the emphasis moved from this manifestation of God through His Spirit, and fell on secondary things which led to party strife and discord. I think that, through this, something went out of the Evangelical movement as it hardened on party lines. To-day we have to work our passage back again in humble dependence on the Spirit. We are called to a larger unity and a wider liberty.

The Holy Spirit Who inspired prophets of old does not work necessarily in cycles. He is always ready to inspire us and to revive us. But the hindrances are on our side. At times it has seemed as though revival was at our doors. Then something, seldom diagnosed adequately, has happened and we have drifted back into the old ways. Why, we ask, have so many big evangelistic efforts been abortive? To-day something will happen again if we are prepared to pay the price : if in obedience to God's call we sink the things that divide and that spoil our witness, if only we can concentrate on the things that unite.

Our need is supremely the Holy Spirit and literally nothing else matters. We cannot move anywhere in the Church in creative service

unless we recapture our sense of the supernatural. We must therefore begin with ourselves and repent before we can call others to repentance. We must unite before we can call others to unity. We must serve before we can ask others for service. If we Evangelicals fail God in this great moment of history, God will use others in our place, for God uses available channels, sometimes clerical, sometimes lay, sometimes from one school of thought, sometimes from another. What we seek for to-day is that the whole Church may draw closer together, co-operate more and seek that God will use His Church for the reviving of our nation and not any particular section of it.

Let me close by summing up what I have tried to say. Movements toward a larger unity are on foot in many directions. The fact that two Church papers have found a common basis and have merged into one publication is significant. Is it not a sign too that the Church Association and the National Church League have amalgamated? A further fact is the way the lay people of our Church seek a central position where the Church of England can carry on its grand work unaffected by Italian influences or Roman claims.

With this urge to Anglical unity we have before us the amazing strides of the ecumenical movement, the growth of inter-Church fellowship and the increasing bonds of co-operation between Church and Church. Some of us feel that in these dangerous days we cannot withhold the right hand of fellowship from any who love our Lord in sincerity.

Our Evangelical isolationism is a sterile thing. God has called us to work and pray for the fellowship of the Spirit in the bond of peace. When we realize that St. Paul gave this as a ruling for the attitude of one Christian to another, we must remember the very wide differences in religious thought between those with a Jewish background and those who were racially Greek.

Let us remember too that the Church is being menaced by forces more powerful than any that have appeared since the early days of Christianity. Our antagonists are the pagan and materialistic forces, the anti-God forces, and not the Christians of another Church or school of thought. Are we not dissipating our strength by warring with one another while the enemy stands at the gate? I believe that the Holy Spirit seeks to teach us again the broad tolerance of the New Testament. "He that is not against us is for us," said our Lord. Our immediate and urgent need is to permeate the entire Church and nation with the Evangel. In our mission efforts we must place more stress on the fact of Christ, the revelation of God, the personal Saviour and Lord of all. We must be able so to present Him to people that they will come to put their trust in Him, accept Him as their Saviour and King, and serve Him in the fellowship of His Church.

I am persuaded that if we find our own way back to the real Evangel, others will join with us and we shall begin something of revival power in our nation. A study of great missions in the past century rather tends to show that God's quickening work has been held up because we have grieved the Holy Spirit by refusing fellowship with those with whom we disagreed. God is calling us. Let us go forth to His obedience and in faith serve Him in the fellowship of His Son.