# Our Evangelical Heritage

By The Bishop of Barking[1]

ISAIAH exhorts the people of Judah, " Look unto the rock from which you were hewn and to the quarry from which you were digged. Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you " (Isaiah li. 1 and 2, R.S.V.).

It is good for us as we meet for this 123rd Islington Conference, in new surroundings, but in the parish where the Conference was born, to look back as well as forward, to remind ourselves of our Evangelical Heritage, and to examine ourselves as to whether we are worthy of and loyal to that heritage.

Let us first of all repudiate a very widely held idea concerning Evangelicals. It is very often said, even in encyclopædias and dictionaries, that Evangelicals are the same as Low Churchmen. But this is entirely erroneous. The name Low Church was coined early in the eighteenth century to describe the Whig Latitudinarian clergy. Henry Sacheverell, writing in 1702 says, " We will sum up the articles of a Low Churchman's creed. He believes very little or no Revelation, and had rather lay his faith upon the substantial Evidences of his own Reason than the precarious Authority of Divine Testimony. He had rather be a Deist, Socinian or Nestorian than affront his own understanding with believing what is incomprehensible, or be so rude as to obtrude on others what he cannot himself explain. He thinks the Articles of the Church too Stiff, Formal and strait-laced a Rule to confine his Faith in. He looks upon the censuring of False Doctrine as a Dogmatical Usurpation, an intrusion upon that Human Liberty, which he sets up as the measure and extent of his Belief."

Such words could never describe Evangelicals ! They are more suited to members of the Modern Churchmen's Union, though they would then seem to show how inappropriate the term Modern is for those who rebel against the authority of Holy Scripture !

The present day use of the word Evangelical is really associated with the Spiritual Revival in this country under the leadership of John Wesley, a Revival which is usually called " The Evangelical Revival ". Those who were leaders in this Revival eventually divided into two parties, the one which advocated separation from the Church of England and whose members were called " Methodists ", and the other which was determined to remain loyal to the Church of England and to work for her return to the scriptural doctrines and practices of the Reformation, and whose members were known as " Evangelicals ". These Anglican Evangelicals, as we may call them, were our real forefathers, and amongst them later on appeared Daniel Wilson,who in 1827 founded the Islington Conference.

The word " Evangelical " was, however, an old name revived. It had been the earliest word in English for adherents to the Reformation,

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and, for example, was used in this connection by Sir Thomas More. This, of course, points to the origin of the word, which literally means " according to the Gospel ". This designation was originally claimed by all Protestants on the ground that their tenets were derived solely from " The Evangel ", in its widest sense, the Bible.

Here, then, we are brought to consider our *Evangelical Heritage* of *Doctrine.* Its foundation is the Bible. Evangelicals are not guilty of bibliolatry, as some accuse them, but, loyal to the sixth, nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first of the Thirty-nine Articles, they believe that nothing, which cannot be found clearly declared in the Scriptures, should be taught as fundamental to the Christian Faith, or added to its doctrines. From study of the Bible, available in the natural tongue, the Reformation arose. From the Bible the Evangelical Revival of the eighteenth century arose. For there, in God's Word Written, are revealed the great doctrines of the Holiness and Love of God, the Incarnation, the Atonement, the depravity of human nature, the necessity for spiritual regeneration and new birth, the justification of the sinner by faith alone, and, consequent upon this, his full assurance of salvation and his indwelling by Christ through the Holy Spirit.

These great doctrines are, of course, the doctrines of the Church of England, and are held by vast numbers of her members who would not call themselves Evangelicals. But it is the Evangelicals who attach such fundamental importance to the doctrine of Justification by Faith as the one from which true spiritual regeneration follows. This is well illustrated in the complete transformation of John Wesley's life and ministry arising from the experience he had in the meeting in Aldersgate Street, when, listening to an exposition of this doctrine, his eyes were opened and, as he puts it so delightfully, " I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, in Christ alone, for salvation, and an assurance was given me that HE had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death." " In Christ alone," these three words perhaps sum up Evangelicalism, and if an answer of one sentence is required to the question, " Wherein do Evangelicals differ from their fellow Churchmen ? " it might well be given, " We believe in the individual's right to direct access to God through Christ alone, without the mediation or intervention of any human priest or ecclesiastical ceremony ". This, more than anything else, was, and is, the hallmark of Evangelicalism.

As Faith leads to Work, so does Doctrine to Worship and Service, and so we turn to consider our *Evangelical Heritage of Practice.* Our forefathers *practised* their faith, they demonstrated it, they worked it out in Worship and Service.

The Evangelicals' emphasis upon the Holiness of God and the sinfulness of man brought a new sense of *Solemnity* into their worship. They turned away in revolt from the fussiness of elaborate ritual and the intricacies of elaborate ceremonial, which no matter how well intentioned, seem to distract attention, turning it from contemplation of God to the antics of man and the beauty (or otherwise) of the garments he wears, and detract from the glory of God, focussing thought upon His servants instead. Evangelicals realized that Dignity at its highest may be seen in Simplicity, and that to worship God in

spirit and in truth depends not upon outward show but upon reverence and humility of heart. Sacraments are meant to be a means to an end and not an end in themselves. But their administration, and indeed, public worship as a whole, can easily become an end in themselves, and attendance at such celebrations can be wrongly regarded as a virtue in itself, as, for instance, watching the spectacle of the Mass. The Evangelical realizing his personal need of a Saviour and of individual communion with God, could never be content with such an idea of Sacramental worship. He himself needed to partake and could never worship by proxy. Non-communicating attendance at Holy Communion destroyed the purpose of that Sacrament. This emphasis which Evangelicals laid upon the importance of communicating at Holy Communion should show how wrong it is to imagine that they regarded it as only or primarily a Memorial Service. Indeed, Bishop Handley Moule wrote, " The Holy Supper is something profoundly other than a mere commemoration. Not only do we keep the Feast, but Christ spreads it and presides at it. Thus we meet not one another only there, but HIM." But this Evangelical Doctrine of the Real Presence is something vastly different from that of the Anglo-Catholics, who teach that it is the act of consecration which makes the Real Presence. To guard against wrong doctrines in connection with the administration of the Holy Communion, Evangelicals were always most particular concerning the vesture and posture of the Minister at this Service.

How did our Evangelical forefathers practise their doctrine in *Service*? How did they carry out their parochial ministry? Here lies a field for useful research which would throw light on how these men faced the opportunities and challenges of their particular day and would provide incentive and ideas for us to-day. There is only time to mention here a few facts about this parish of Islington during the Vicariate of Daniel Wilson, Senior. He was only Vicar here for eight years before his appointment to the Bishopric of Calcutta, but during that time a complete transformation of the parochial life was achieved. The whole parish was mapped out into districts, and house-to-house visitors enrolled. Fifteen Sunday Schools were held. At his first Confirmation Service he presented no less than 780 candidates! An early Sunday morning administration of the Holy Communion was started, the Litany was said on Wednesdays and Fridays, and a Service held on Saints' Days. Three new churches were built with a total seating capacity of 5,000. Daniel Wilson was succeeded as Vicar by his son, also Daniel by name, who during a period of over fifty years carried on and extended his father's work in a remarkable manner. Such a record of evangelistic and pastoral ministry during a period of rapid growth of population and new housing development provides us with an inspiring challenge to-day, one which the present Vicar has accepted with courage and initiative, for once again in this place the Church is moving forward, if not quite " like a mighty army ", yet with the daring and endurance of a Commando Brigade!

A study of our Evangelical Heritage would be grossly incomplete unless attention were drawn to the high standard of conduct and of disciplined holy living set by our forefathers. These Evangelicals of old were men who knew their God; they were men of God, men of

Prayer, men of Christlike character, men filled with the Holy Ghost. They proved the truth of the Evangelical Doctrines by the way they lived. They demonstrated the reality of justification by faith by their works. Through their evangelistic preaching and through the witness of their lives, thousands upon thousands of sinful men and women were converted and experienced a similar transformation of character, and this miracle was one which even their opponents admitted.

Although special emphasis in their preaching was always laid upon the Atonement and man's consequent reconciliation with God, the great implications of the Doctrine of the Incarnation were not neglected. By word and by example these men proclaimed how the Lord Christ, Who became Man, still dwelled with man upon earth, entering into his daily life and toil, so that work became worship, and " the daily round, the common task " a thrilling experience of the presence and power of God.

Moreover, as these truths were more closely studied, the Evangelicals became foremost in the movement for social reform, for the material as well as the spiritual welfare of their fellowmen. Indeed, the better features of our Welfare State to-day can be traced back to Evangelical parentage ! Realization of the need for expressing love for God by love for man also showed itself in the great foreign missionary enterprises which have been some of the greatest glories of Evangelicalism.

Are we showing ourselves worthy of our heritage ? Are we at all like these men ? in doctrine, in practice, in character ? Such questions are disturbing and humbling, but must be faced if we are to be true " Evangelicals To-day ".

I would close by quoting words which will be found in G. R. Balleine's Preface to his classic, *History of the Evangelical Party*.

" A Party has been defined as ' a section of a larger society, united to carry out the objects of the whole body on principles and by methods peculiar to itself '. It is in this sense that the word can be used of the Evangelicals. They have never been a party of the parliamentary type, drilled and disciplined to respond promptly to the crack of the whip. Though they have shown almost a genius for organization—the great Missionary Societies are evidence of this—they have always refused to use this power merely for party purposes. . . . They have worked together, a distinct group within the larger Society of the Church, with methods and principles more or less peculiar to themselves, but with no object, except that for which the whole Church exists, the Salvation of Souls and the training of citizens for the Kingdom of Christ."