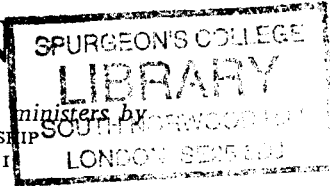


# The Theological Students' Fellowship

## BULLETIN



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## CONTENTS

Evangelism and the Intellectual	The Rev. James Philip, M.A.	1
The Textual Transmission of the Old Testament	The Rev. D. K. Innes, M.A.	4
Biblical Hermeneutics: Part II	The Rev. John A. Balchin, M.A., B.D.	9
Student Evangelistic Campaigns	The Rev. John Handley	12
Book Reviews		13

### EVANGELISM AND THE INTELLECTUAL

By the Rev. JAMES PHILIP, M.A.

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THERE ARE two basic facts to remember in considering the question of evangelism and the intellectual. One is that the intellectual is also a man, and basically his need is the same as the need of the non-intellectual. In the last analysis he cannot say 'I am not as other men are', for he must come to the kingdom in precisely the same way and on the same terms as all other men, by faith in Christ. There is not, nor can there ever be, one gospel for ordinary men and another for the intellectual. The second fact is that, while this must always be so, the intellectual does in fact present a specialized problem in that the expression of his need is much more varied and often very much more complicated. There are questions for him in the realm of thought of which ordinary men are not aware, questions which necessarily arise in connection with systems and philosophies which are sometimes at total variance with the Christian position. In all honesty an attempt must be made to answer them. In this sense a specialized approach is sometimes rendered necessary.

This situation, however, should not be thought of as one fraught with insuperable difficulties for evangelism, but on the contrary as affording in many ways a far greater opportunity to preach the gospel on a wider range than is possible in a non-intellectual environment. This should

become plain when we remember that the initial appeal of the gospel is to the mind. The scriptural pattern is that it is Truth presented to the mind that kindles the heart and challenges and conquers the will. It is obvious then that, in spite of the difficulties involved, the potential for effectual work is considerably greater and the range of opportunity very wide.

Indeed the atmosphere of intellectualism is in one sense particularly conducive to the message of the gospel. For it is precisely in the intellectual and cultural milieu that the most significant, acute and articulate expression of ultimate problems is found. Where men *think* the tragic dilemma of life always obtrudes itself. It is not without significance that the altar with the inscription 'To the unknown God' — eloquent symbol of human failure to find the answer to the ultimate mysteries of life — was found in a university city. Athens was the home of all that was great in ancient culture, the representative of the best learning, knowledge and philosophy in the ancient world, and possibly the highest ever attained by the human spirit. It is this consciousness of the problem of human existence that affords the opportunity to interpret the situation most effectively in terms of the gospel and the answer it offers to the questing and questioning of the human spirit.

## I

The apostle Paul has something to say on this question. In his first Corinthian Epistle he observes that 'not many wise men after the flesh . . . are called'. To imagine, as some do, that this means that the Christian faith can boast of few intellectual converts is to pre-suppose something demonstrably false. But this is not Paul's point. It is not wise men as such, but wise men *after the flesh* that he refers to in this passage. It is not reason, but *fleshly* reason, that stands in irreconcilable opposition to the Christian faith. The gospel is foolishness to the Greeks, not ultimately because it is thought irrational, but because pride of intellect, as Emil Brunner puts it, revolts against the claim that truth lies outside the realm of reason. It is the claim that the world by wisdom cannot know God that constitutes the stumbling block, for this lays decisive limitations upon reason as such, and reason is not prepared to accept these. This is why not many wise men after the flesh are called. Reason is not prepared to abdicate the throne of its autonomy in favour of any concept beyond itself.

It is in the light of this basic, fundamental position that intellectual difficulties must be dealt with, and this is the touchstone by which they must be judged.

The implications of this are very considerable, for it means, in fact, that ultimately the so-called intellectual difficulties which stand as a barrier to conversion have a moral basis. This is a sweeping statement, but it is borne out by the teaching of the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians. The wisdom of the world stands in antagonism against, and in opposition and antithesis to, the hidden wisdom of God because it represents reason in revolt against the personal will of God.

This is seen in general in philosophical reaction to the assertions of the Christian faith, and nowhere perhaps more strikingly than in the moral idealism of Kantian thought, which has been described as being the most penetrating of all modern philosophies in its definition of evil as the paradox of 'radical evil'. Brunner, in *The Mediator*, p. 142, observes: 'The reason why the Kantian doctrine lags behind the Christian view is that it remains within the sphere of mere reason, and this means that it is not truly personal. For it measures man only by an impersonal law. Kant, therefore, rightly does not use the term "sin", but the impersonal conception of "evil", an expression which is never used of personal relationships. In his theory the point at issue is not the fact that the human will is contrary to the Divine will, but that the human will does not agree with the law' — that is to say, it is still only an impersonal, intellectual problem. And Brunner goes on to say, very significantly: 'Kant knew very well why he did not go further. To go further would have meant leaving the rational standpoint of the philosopher behind and becoming a believer.' This means however that 'the real stumbling block is not the theoretical paradox but the moral humiliation'.

We should not cavil at the decisiveness of this verdict. It is, after all, borne out by the experience of men who have come to the Christian faith by the way of a long pilgrimage of intellectual doubt and difficulty. One recalls C. S. Lewis' confession that he was pulled into the kingdom of God kicking and struggling against the inexorable Divine logic of the gospel. The real point at issue with him was not, in the last analysis, the intellectual difficulty of believing, but the moral capitulation and surrender that believing involved.

This fact however does not preclude the possibility or indeed the necessity of fairly extensive 'pre-evangelism' of the intellectual, in terms of a closely-knit and well-reasoned apologetic, if only to demonstrate the real nature of the issues that confront him in the gospel. It is sometimes said that we must meet men *where they are*, implying that the intellectual must be met on the intellectual plane. But it depends what is meant by this somewhat nebulous phrase. If what has been said above is valid, then the intellectual plane is precisely *not* where the intellectual really is at all, and to meet him there is not to meet him at the real point of his need. This is not always as fully realized as it might be. Apologetics therefore have their place. But apologetics should not be considered as evangelism as such any more than the law can be confused with the gospel. The analogy indeed between apologetics and the law holds good so far as this is concerned; the function of both is to bring men to an end of all reasoning and face to face with Christ, so as to see that the true nature of the challenge that they encounter in the gospel is not intellectual but moral and spiritual.

It is to this inexorable crisis-point that the philosopher has to come. For, essentially considered, all philosophies are closed systems; they do not admit anything breaking in from beyond, and to assert, as the Christian message emphatically does, the fact of Divine revelation and the need for it, and to claim that Truth is bound up with a once-for-all historical event, that it 'came' by Jesus Christ — this is to break through the whole concept of intellect as such, and to call in question the validity of not merely this or that, but all philosophy. When this point is reached, therefore, there are only two alternatives: either the revolt of the intellect against the claim that truth lies outside the realm of reason, with the despair that this inevitably brings; or — faith in Jesus Christ.

## II

There is another line of approach and another area of opportunity open to us in our concern to evangelize the intellectual, and that is, as we pointed out earlier, to interpret the cultural situation to him in terms of the gospel. This is necessarily an indirect approach, but it is nevertheless a valid one, and indeed particularly fruitful at a time when the problem of communication is very acute. There is a principle involved in this which is illustrated by Christ's dealings with the woman of Samaria, and this gives sufficient warrant for applying it to the question of culture in general. Christ's approach to the woman was indirect, and the first word He spoke was to the conscious, psychological need of her heart, as He dealt with the question of living water. But His second word was to her sin, and He interpreted the first in terms of the second, indicating that it was the moral problem in her life that was the root cause of her thirst for living water. This analogy holds good with reference to cultural forms in general and gives a point of contact with the intellectual of the greatest significance.

What we mean is this: The Bible speaks of guilt. This is an objective reality. This is how things are between us and God. It is the barrier, the obstacle between us and God, which no human means can ever remove. It is the mark of our revolt, of the distortion of our lives. Since, however, even in our sin, we do not cease to be destined for God, the fact of guilt, as Brunner penetratingly puts it, manifests itself in a perpetual conflict in which the desire to escape from God and the longing for His peace are constantly at variance. Now, the evidences of this conflict cannot be wholly kept down, even though men may finally still the voice of conscience within them. The psychologists teach us about dissociated symptoms which appear when repression takes place in the human mind.

In a much larger and more general sense this phenomenon also operates with regard to the basic contradictions of human life. The fact of guilt often clothes itself in strange forms, dissociated from specifically religious categories altogether. Colin Wilson's disturbing book, *The Outsider*, with its sub-title, *An Enquiry into the nature of the sickness of mankind in the mid-twentieth century*, provides an excellent illustration of this, for he examines various cultural forms — art, literature, the theatre, music — in this light and seeks to diagnose the nature of the problem of which particular patterns are the articulate symptoms.

This, of course, is a specialized approach, as we pointed out earlier, but it is a very relevant one. The sense of conflict, the sense of groping vainly in a dark room for a door that is felt must be there, is often urgent and acute, whether it be in the tragic pathos of romantic music by Tchaikovsky or Rachmaninoff or the despairing intellectual brilliance of Sibelius; the aching longing of the romantic poets like Keats and Wordsworth, or the gloomy fatalism of Arnold and Thomas Hardy; the aberrations of cubist and surrealist art or the near-pathological distortions of Van Gogh. The great question mark over the whole of human existence is more tragically and sensitively evident in the world of culture than anywhere else, and this presents a challenge and opportunity to the Christian in a college environment. This is the particular 'world' in which of necessity he is involved. There is no contracting out of it for him; it is here supremely that he must be able to give a reason for the hope that is in him.