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The Evangelistic Work of the Church.¹

II. THE ADAPTATION OF THE MESSAGE.

BY W. GUY JOHNSON

THE Report of the Committee appointed by the Archbishop of Canterbury to consider the question of the Evangelistic work of the Church is a document which from its very title must have a profound interest for Evangelical Churchmen. From whatever point of view we may regard it there can be no question that it represents an earnest and sincere attempt to grapple with a very urgent and difficult problem. It starts with the admission that the Church of this generation has failed to win the people of England as a whole for Christ ; and it sets out the causes of this failure with a frankness and fullness in striking contrast to the laudation of the Church's growth and progress which was the fashion up to the time of the National Mission.

With many of the causes to which the Report attributes this failure in evangelistic effort the present paper is not directly concerned. It deals only with the adaptation of the message to the circumstances and habits of thought of the people of modern times, always a difficult problem, though not, it should be borne in mind, a new one. It is not in any way peculiar to our own age and circumstances. At all periods of the world's history and in all countries the preachers of the Gospel have had to take into account the inherited influences, the acquired knowledge, and the prejudices of their hearers and also the social and other conditions in which they were placed ; and if they would succeed have had to adapt their message or, perhaps it would be more correct to say, the presentation of their message, accordingly. St. Paul, the great type and pattern of an evangelist, said, "I am made all things to all men that I might by all means save some."

But those succeed best who will also follow St. Paul when he said : "The Jews require a sign and the Greeks seek after wisdom. But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling-block and unto the Greeks foolishness ; but unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."

¹ A paper read at the Southwark Evangelical Conference on October 17.

· If by the adaptation of the message is intended any dilution of it, or any softening down of its distinctive features with a view to rendering it more acceptable to the hearers, it may be said at once that such a process finds no support from the preaching of the apostles or of our Lord Himself. The Gospel is God's word of mercy and salvation to a guilty and lost world, and those who are ambassadors for Christ have no authorization to vary the terms of their commission. It is their business to deliver it whether those to whom they are sent will hear or whether they will forbear.

But while this remains true, it is equally true that no necessity is laid upon us to retain as part of the message all the theological conceptions and forms of expression of those who have in other days been successful Evangelists. We need not be too ready to suppose that men whom God has greatly blessed to the winning of souls for Christ were much in error as to either the form or the contents of the Gospel which they preached with such converting power, nevertheless it is our duty to deliver that august message as the Holy Spirit through the divine Word has made it known to *us*, and as it has laid hold upon ourselves; and not to be mere copyists of those who have gone before. It is the Gospel as a living and life-giving power which we have to apprehend for ourselves and to present to others. If we regard it as an inherited tradition, a theological formula, or as something capable of exact and precise definition, it will elude our grasp and leave us in possession only of a shibboleth. We are dealing with momentous realities, with matters of life and death, with the character and destiny of immortal beings, and we must not fail to deal with them *as* realities. If this is what they are in truth to us, then we shall by all means seek to present them as such to others, in words suited to their understanding and applicable to their conditions. This is I apprehend what is meant by adaptation of the message.

It is desirable, however, to consider in what the Christian message really consists if we are to estimate the extent to which any adaptation is possible or necessary in particular circumstances. In spite of innumerable divergences upon many matters of by no means small importance, there is a large measure of agreement upon its main features.

That man was made in the image of God, capable of holding

communion with his Maker, that his life was intended to be spent in the service of God, and that apart from God he can never attain the full perfection of his being, seems to be the starting point. But man has universally failed to realize this ideal, and whatever view may be taken of the question of guilt there are few who will deny that sin is the cause of this failure and that it has separated man from God. It is, moreover, clear from the Christian revelation that man cannot restore the severed relations with his Creator, and the history of religions throughout all ages is but a melancholy record of the failure of attempts to do so. What, however, man could not do for himself God has done for him through the Incarnation and the Atonement of Christ, God drawing near to man and dying for him in the person of His Son. By the acceptance of Christ as the Divine Mediator and through personal union with Him man can be restored to God and made a partaker of the Divine life. The past is blotted out and a new principle of life is given to him, capable of infinite development, in the power of which he can henceforth live unto God. He is, as it were, now on the side of God and can draw upon the Divine resources for the supply of his needs. He becomes, in fact, a child of God by adoption and grace, and returns to his Father's house.

This, however, is not the end, it is only the beginning. The new life is given not that he may pass it in selfish and unfruitful enjoyment ; but that he may spend it in the love and service of God and of his fellow-man :—

“ Heaven doth with us as we with torches do,
 Not light them for themselves : for if our virtues
 Did not go forth of us, 'twere all alike
 As if we had them not. Spirits are not finely touched
 But to fine issues.”

There is, however, no greater mistake than to suppose that the work of evangelization as carried out by Evangelical Churchmen stops short “ at safety ” and does not go on to service. No evangelistic movement ever had a nobler outcome in social, philanthropic and missionary service than that which can be claimed for the great Evangelical revival of the eighteenth century.

But though the Gospel is indisputably a call to service, it is first of all a call to salvation, in other words, a call to the restoration of those relations with God which sin has destroyed. I do not think

that the Report of the Archbishop's Committee is intended to imply any other view. The antithesis which it sets up between the "Appeal of Safety" and the "Appeal of Service" is not very happily expressed, but the contrast, it should be noted, is between *medieval* preaching with its crudely material view of hell, and the kind of preaching needed now: it does not in terms relate to such preaching as that of Wesley, Whitefield, or in recent times D. L. Moody.

Any summary of the Gospel message is open to criticism, and it will be noted that in the one attempted above the points which most give rise to controversy and difficulty, the question of the Fall, the purpose and effect of the Incarnation, the nature of the Atonement and the problems of Eschatology which all have the most vital influence upon the preaching and presentation of the Gospel, have not been referred to, because, although a right view of them is of profound importance, yet Christ Himself, crucified and risen, as Saviour and Lord is our message and not any theological theory of the manner in which He saves. I may perhaps quote from the late Dr. R. W. Dale a man not to be suspected of any tendency to underestimate the value of a scientific theological system. Writing of Francis Turretin's references to the Doctrine of the Atonement as "the chief part of our Salvation, the anchor of Faith, the refuge of Hope, the rule of Charity, the true foundation of the Christian religion, and the richest treasure of the Christian Church," Dr. Dale said: "Such words as these are true only of the Atonement itself; they cannot be justly used concerning any doctrine or theory of the Atonement. . . . For it is not the Doctrine of the Death of Christ that atones for human sin, but the Death itself, and great as are the uses of the doctrine in promoting the healthy and vigorous development of the spiritual life, the death of Christ has such a wonderful power, that it inspires faith in God, and purifies the heart though the doctrine of the Atonement may be unknown or denied."

Now if the Christian message be in substance as I have stated it, and if we look at it as a whole, the question of its adaptation assumes a simpler appearance. In its nature and essence it is obviously suited to all types of men in all ages; but clearly we should, and in practice do, present it differently to different classes or types. Let us take the work of Wesley and his companions in the eighteenth century, for instance, and compare it with our own day. It was a

time of the grossest profligacy and wickedness throughout all classes of society from the highest to the lowest. There was no very great need to labour the point that man had sinned, the fact was only too obvious. In such cases we do not by any means find a deep sense of the guilt or sinfulness of sin—that is the fruit of a ripened Christian experience—but we often find a very real sense of the tyranny and devastating character of sin and a dread of its consequences; a desire for relief now and for escape hereafter. We should naturally expect to find Gospel preaching at such times to dwell much upon punishment and upon the possibility of immediate salvation, the urgency being so great. But in our own age, as contrasted with a century and a half ago, gross wickedness, while alas it still exists, is compelled to slink into corners, as witness the standards required of public men; ethical considerations are made more of; ideals are higher; we are inclined to disparage our attainments and to seek for improvement in all directions. It is natural then that the preacher should dwell more upon the beauty and perfection of the life which God offers to us and less upon the dangers we incur in refusing it, more upon the glory of a life spent in the service of God and of our fellow-men, and less upon the misery and terrors of Hell. It is unreal and exaggerated to use language conveying the charge of gross wickedness to people who, like the young Ruler, are not conscious of any serious violation of the moral law. That is not the way to produce a sense of sin, and it was not our Lord's way. He could call the hypocritical Pharisees a generation of vipers and inquired of them how they would escape the damnation of hell. But to the young Ruler He by his silence admitted the claim to have observed "all these" from his youth up, and starting from this ground said, "If thou wouldest be perfect go and sell, and give, and follow Me."

It is inappropriate to offer a tract on the sin of dancing to a man with a wooden leg. If we would adapt the message to our own day we must deal with the conditions of our own day. There is a useful hint in the exceedingly valuable and suggestive appendix contributed by the secretaries of the Student Movement to the Evangelistic Report. "She (the Church) gives her attention too much to anti-social sins, though they receive much less attention in the teaching of Christ than do the sins of the spirit—anger, jealousy, selfishness, snobbishness, class feeling and suchlike things." This appendix is one of the most useful and practical parts of the Report.

The question of the Fall will perhaps also indicate the manner in which the message may be adapted to meet an altered mental attitude. For a generation past the idea of evolution has practically dominated our thought in almost every direction. It is natural then that the preacher who is pressing upon unconverted men the claims of the Gospel should dwell more upon the fact than the origin of sin. Man may have fallen from a state of ideal perfection or may only in the course of ages been painfully and slowly approaching it. Which of these is the solution of the problem, or whether it may be found in a combination of them, is a matter of great importance in its place, but it is one for the Christian student to ponder as he daily learns more of the true meaning of the Word of God and of the work of grace in his heart. The point which matters is that, however it has happened, man is out of the way and needs to be put into it. He may have missed the mark because he has lost the capacity to shoot straight or because he has never acquired it, but that he has missed it is a fact of universal experience; and the wise preacher will not put possible stumbling-blocks in the way of an earnest inquirer by dwelling on the details of the Fall as recorded in the early chapters of Genesis.

To take another and more crucial instance, the realm over which thought in regard to the Christian message has been most profoundly affected and modified in the present day is without doubt that of Biblical criticism. Opinion as to the nature and extent of inspiration has been influenced by it to a degree which in some cases amounts to a revolution, and even in the most conservative quarters is far greater than the persons affected by it realize or would perhaps be disposed to admit. Of the actual results of critical inquiry in its own sphere, I am not qualified to express an opinion, but it cannot be denied that there is a widespread conviction among the mass of ordinary people that the authority of the Bible can no longer be relied upon as heretofore. The extreme and crude statements of the more advanced critics have by means of the newspapers been made known to large numbers of people who have never read and would not understand the books in which these statements are made, and the result is a very general unsettlement of belief. I am convinced that no critical results which will finally commend themselves to Christian scholarship, or which will do justice to the whole tenour of Scripture or to the facts of history and of Christian experience,

will affect the essential contents of the Gospel as generally received ; but whatever view is taken in regard to particular miracles, whether in the Old Testament or the New, Christianity is, and professes to be, a supernatural religion. Moreover, whatever may be the case with the Church or with particular Churches, Christianity is not upon its trial. It has demonstrated its power in a way which the hardest controversialist cannot deny, and in proclaiming the message it is above all things necessary that we should do so with the certainty and conviction borne of this knowledge. The reason for so much of the half-belief and misbelief which we find prevalent within and without the Church is due far less to the increase of new knowledge than to our own failure to assimilate and co-ordinate it. It is a duty which the Church owes to those who look to her for guidance or to those whom she could guide whether they looked to her or not, that her members should give serious thought and study to such questions. We must, however, take account of things as they are and reckon with the state of mind of those whom we approach rather than spend time in deploring it, and while we may be and are as certain as ever of the value, importance and authority of the Christian revelation, we need not confuse the issue by presenting it to people in terms which bind up with it disputed questions as to the method and manner by which it has come to us. This again is not to say that these questions are unimportant, only that this is not the time or place for them.

It would be easy to multiply examples, but those given indicate sufficiently the limits within which it is here suggested that adaptation of the Christian message is possible. A widening of them would seem to belong more to apologetics than to evangelization. It may be felt that many of the difficulties which press upon the preacher as he seeks to win men for Christ have not been met. It must be said, however, that the "offence of the Cross" cannot be made to cease. When our Lord was on earth there were many who saw no beauty in Him that they should desire Him. When even inspired Apostles preached the Gospel it was written that some believed and some did not. The Report we are considering very truly states that we cannot organize a revival, nor can we, I would add, *force* one.

Our lack of success in winning men for Christ is far less due to their unwillingness to come to Him, than to our failure to present in our own lives examples of His grace and power ; less to their unbelief

than to ours. The Report upon Evangelization has been very freely criticized, and I think not always fairly, though there are parts of it which at least need some explanation. But it is on the right lines when it ascribes much of the failure which it deplures to neglect of prayer, to neglect of the Word of God, and to slackness and lack of energy on the part of those, laity no less than clergy, whose duty it is to proclaim the Gospel. When we ourselves really believe the Gospel and not merely its external facts, when we are faithful to its teachings and give time to the study of it, and when it is a living and growing personal experience in our lives, we shall find much less difficulty in presenting it to others and in adapting the form of its presentation to the needs of our day.

