

What is Anglican Evangelicalism?

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I

There is a great deal of misconception concerning Evangelicalism. Many identify it, out of hand, with what they call “Low Churchmanship” and assume that its essence relates to an aversion to elaborate ceremonial, the wearing of vestments, etc. The difference between Evangelicalism and so-called Low Churchmanship goes much deeper than regard or disregard for ceremonial. There is a vital distinction in the matter of dogma. Arnold is often regarded as the founder of the Broad Church Party, but, in point of fact, the principle of so-called non-dogmatic Christianity found expression much earlier and formed an important element in the school of Locke, ultimately developing into Deism.¹ It would carry us far from our purpose to enumerate the various shades of opinion from the almost Unitarianism of Locke to the guarded tolerance of Tillotson and Stillingfleet, but it can be said with perfect truth that Low Churchmanship has developed from non-dogmatic Christianity, sometimes taking the form of indifference to ceremonial, but, in its higher aspects, embracing schemes of comprehension intended to abate sectarian jealousies and internecine strife amongst Christians or theists.

The Evangelical position is, however, quite distinct from this and ought never to be confused with it. John Wesley’s great objective was to impress upon the mass of the people the very strong spiritual revelation which he had himself experienced. Readers of his *Journal* will remember the remarkable words in which he recorded the deep change that had come upon him.

“In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther’s Preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, 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.”²

Wesley grasped at that moment what has been tersely expressed in another of Luther’s commentaries—on the Epistle to the Galatians—as follows:

“Wherefore the afflicted and troubled conscience hath no remedy against desperation and eternal death, unless it take hold of the forgiveness of sins by grace, freely offered in Christ Jesus. . . . Thus I abandon myself from all active righteousness, both of mine own and of God’s law, and embrace only that passive righteousness, which is the righteousness of grace, mercy and forgiveness of sins. Briefly, I rest only upon that righteousness which is the righteousness of Christ and of the Holy Ghost”.³

This abiding conviction sustained him and drove him to ever fresh exertions in an amazingly busy life of fifty-two years from 1738 to 1791. It was the old message of “Justification by Faith only” which was finding expression again in the dull, drab days of the eighteenth century. The new emphasis in Wesley’s experience and later in Wesley’s preaching was on a

personal appropriation of the blessings offered by Christ in His Gospel on the basis of His atoning sacrifice.

This must be regarded as the vital feature of the Evangelical Revival from which springs, as its lineal successor, the Evangelical Movement in the Church of England. Charles Simeon was, in many respects, a contrast to John Wesley. His ministry was confined to Cambridge, except for his holiday visits to Scotland and the very wide ramification of his influence. His was the reflective, theological mind in contrast to the active, organising, experimental nature of Wesley. Yet in this essential feature of the need and possibility of a personal experience of redeeming love and a conscious assurance of acceptance before God, we find these two men, of such different temperaments and ministerial spheres, of one and the same mind. Simeon wrote:

“My distress of mind continued for about three months, and well might it have continued for years, since my sins were more in number than the hairs of my head; but God in infinite condescension began at last to smile upon me, and to give me a hope of acceptance with Him. . . . In Passion Week, as I was reading Bishop Wilson on the Lord’s Supper, I met with an expression to this effect—‘That the Jews knew what they did when they transferred their sin to the head of their offering’. The thought came into my mind, What, may I transfer all my guilt to another? Has God provided an offering for me, that I may lay my sins on His Head? Then, God willing, I will not bear them on my own soul one moment longer. Accordingly I sought to lay my sins upon the sacred head of Jesus; and on the Wednesday began to have a hope of mercy; on the Thursday that hope increased; on the Friday and Saturday it became more strong, and on the Sunday morning, Easter Day, April 4, I awoke early with those words upon my heart and lips: ‘Jesus Christ is risen to-day! Hallelujah! Hallelujah!’ From that hour peace flowed in rich abundance into my soul: and at the Lord’s Table in our Chapel I had the sweetest access to God through my blessed Saviour.”³

The importance of personal relations with God and our Lord Jesus Christ was the keynote of the Evangelical message. Whether we study the active mind of Wesley, or the more deliberate scholarly presentations of Simeon, or the rugged pastoral efficiency of Grimshaw, or the dramatic insistence of Whitefield, the one urgent call sounds from all: “Have intimate personal dealings with the Saviour of sinners”.

It would be a mistake to assume that the early Evangelicals were merely intent on urging people to save their own souls. They had a deep conviction, however, that no man could have real concern for the soul of his neighbour who had not been first awakened by the Holy Spirit to a sense of his own need. Experience, spread over centuries, has justified this conviction. The well known story of Augustine and the voice of a child bidding him “Take up and read”⁵ which impelled him to study the words, “Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in strife and envy, but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh to fulfil the lusts thereof”, or the burdened spirit of Luther finding expression in the agonised cry: “My sins! my sins!”, or the testimony of Calvin: “Since I was devoted to the superstitions of popery too pertinaciously to admit of my being easily extricated from such an abyss of mire, my mind, which had become more callous than might be expected from one of my years (God) subdued to teachableness by a sudden conversion”⁶ : such instances could be multiplied; but enough has been said to lead to the conclusion that an outstanding feature in the early Evangelicals’ experience was a consciousness of sin forgiven.

II

Immediately the question thrusts itself upon us, as it thrust itself upon the preachers of the eighteenth century, What is the ground of this confidence? It is not too much to say, in seeking an answer to this question, that the Evangelicals recovered for the Church the great truth of the supremacy of God's Word. Sometimes we are led to believe that the difference between our age and the age which we are considering is that no one then doubted the sovereign authority of Sacred Scripture; but to assert such a difference is far from the truth. It may be that the particular temper of unbelief has changed somewhat, but unbelief was there and was supported by a large company who regarded themselves as Apostles of sound reason. It was the age of Deism, which asserted the capacity of man to reach unaided the highest moral heights. Bishop Butler wrote in 1736:

“Some persons, upon pretence of the sufficiency of the light of Nature, avowedly reject all Revelation, as in its very notion incredible, and what must be fictitious. . . . There are other persons, not to be ranked with these, who seem to be getting into a way of neglecting, and, as it were, overlooking Revelation as of small importance, provided Natural Religion be kept to. . . . This way of considering Revelation, though it is not the same with the former, yet borders nearly upon it, and very much at length runs up into it: and requires to be particularly considered, with regard to the persons who seem to be getting into this way.”⁷

Two years after this pronouncement was made, John Wesley felt his heart “strangely warmed” and began to preach “peace with God” through that very Revelation that had been altogether thrust aside by some and regarded as an adjunct and enforcement of Natural Religion by others. In season and out of season these new pioneers of the Evangel cried unceasingly to men, “God has spoken!” Dr Findlay informs us that

“A rationalistic Deism then largely prevailed amongst educated men—a system of thought which fenced men off from mankind behind the laws of nature and bounded human knowledge by the limits of sense, perception and logical reason. The Deity was treated as an absentee from his world; and men consequently became godless in practice as in thought. The Revival swept down these artificial barriers. God was realised in living contact with his children. . . . Hence the emphasis laid in the teaching of the Wesleys on ‘the witness of the Spirit’ (Romans 8). The doctrine of assurance—the personal certainty of the forgiveness of sins and of restored sonship toward God— was the outstanding feature of original Methodism. To most Churchmen of the time professions of this kind appeared a strange ‘enthusiasm’.”⁸

What is here characterised as an outstanding feature of Methodism is true of every type included under the Evangelical Revival. Thus Newton could write: “Approach my soul, the mercy seat . . . For none can perish there.” Newton's hymn suitably combines the sense of personal assurance with the authority attaching to the Word of God. The sinner finds his title, not in any purely subjective condition of ecstaticism, but in the sure promises of the recorded Word. Perhaps this close affinity between the promises of Scripture and the assurance of pardon is brought out most clearly in the words:

“Thy promise is my only plea,
With this I venture nigh;
Thou callest burdened souls to Thee,
And such, O Lord, am I.”

This has been an outstanding element in the Evangelical tradition. It would not be correct to say that there are two ways of regarding Sacred Scripture and to separate them wholly—the

way of criticism and historic appraisal, and the way of experimental appropriation. The two ways are not wholly diverse and cannot be kept in water-tight compartments. But it would be true to say that the Evangelicals busied themselves mainly in seeking to bring home to the hearts of men the essential teaching of Scripture as an authoritative voice of God. They realised most keenly that, in order to accomplish their great task, a power outside of themselves was requisite, the renewing power of the Holy Ghost; and hence the insistence on 'the witness of the Spirit' which became, as Wesley and others speedily saw, a source of peril to souls when divorced from the sobering influence of God's Word.

No human movement has ever yet emerged that has not been the subject of distortion. The Pietism of Spener and his followers is no exception to this rule. The Evangelicals were sensible of the dangers attendant on uncontrolled mysticism. Simeon, with his usual clarity, enunciates the proper corrective. He wrote to a friend, "I love the simplicity of the Scriptures; and I wish to receive and inculcate every truth precisely in the way, and to the extent, that it is set forth in the inspired Volume. Were this the habit of all divines, there would be an end of most of the controversies that have agitated and divided the Church."⁹ The Evangelicals believed the Bible and endeavoured to make its meaning clear. That does not mean, as is sometimes suggested, that they were averse to intensive study of the circumstances which gave rise to the prophetic declarations and the Gospel narratives. They did not conceive that the Bible should be received, as the Koran is alleged to be received by devout Mohammedans, as a series of messages straight from heaven, without any intermediate blending of history and personal experiences. Horne's *Introduction to the Holy Scriptures*, so warmly commended by Bishop Wilson of Calcutta, is in itself sufficient indication of that fact. Horne, in the second edition of this remarkable work, the product of twenty years' assiduous labour, writes:

"He (the author) has only to express his ardent hope, that this part of his labours may, through the Divine blessing, enable his readers to be *ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh them a reason of the hope that is in them*: and he most earnestly requests that they will examine and combine, with candour and attention, all the various evidences here adduced for the genuineness, authenticity, credibility, and divine inspiration of the Holy Scriptures: and then solemnly and deliberately, as rational and accountable beings, deduce that inference from the whole, for which they must hereafter answer at the tribunal of God."¹⁰

It would be unjust to the memory of men of zeal and ability in critical studies not to make this reservation. But the core of the Evangelical message is found elsewhere. The aim which these pioneers set before them was to interpret the message of the text and to bring it home to the consciences of the hearers. They knew that God had spoken to their souls through His living Word, and they laboured to bring the divine truth, which had proved precious to them, under the notice of others in the clearest manner possible. The two outstanding facts which were enforced with all the fervour of intense conviction were, first, man's helpless sinfulness, and, second, Christ's full satisfaction for sin, issuing in the blessing of complete justification of him who trusts in Jesus Christ.

It must not be assumed that there were no differences of a material character on sublime themes, or that controversy did not at times attain to a bitterness that indicates the weakness of great souls; but the earnest proclamation of the express message of the Gospel mitigated the harshness of discussion and united those who might otherwise have felt estranged. Wesley himself preferred to describe his opinions as Evangelical Arminianism and was bold enough to include the distinctive Calvinistic doctrine of Total Depravity in his own

declaration of faith. The great truth that Christ our Lord died for sinners and, apart from Him, there was no hope of salvation, and even in Him there could be no dependence on human merit, was the incessant topic of all evangelical preaching.

Not unnaturally the question of the relationship of full justification by faith to the sacramental teaching of the New Testament came up for consideration. Simeon, the theologian, deals with this question more fully than did the active field-preachers of the movement. The latter occupied themselves with the earnest effort to awaken the careless and sin-besmirched to a sense of their real need. In modern phraseology, they were evangelists rather than pastors or teachers. Again, the Methodist 'class meeting' occupied itself more particularly with Rules of Conduct devised to avert the dangers of a false security and a misapplication of the doctrine of immediate personal assurance of salvation. Wesley, in his revised form of the Thirty-Nine Articles, omitted from the Article on Baptism the words:

“Whereby, as by an instrument, they that receive Baptism rightly are grafted into the Church; the promises of forgiveness of sin, and of our adoption to be the sons of God by the Holy Ghost, are visibly signed and sealed; Faith is confirmed, and Grace increased by virtue of prayer unto God”.

On the other hand Simeon was a true lover, not only of the Church of England, but of the very language of her formularies. “Never,” he wrote, “do I find myself nearer to God than I often am in the reading-desk. The finest sight short of heaven would be a whole congregation using the prayers of the Liturgy in the true spirit of them”.¹¹ It is of value, therefore, to record Simeon’s deepest and most mature convictions on this important subject:

“Great, exceeding great benefit accrues to the soul from Baptism. Where the ordinance is really attended upon in faith, and prayer is offered up to God in faith, we do believe that God bestows a peculiar blessing on the child, though we cannot ascertain that He does so but by the fruits that are afterwards produced. . . . But even from the ordinance itself we may consider great good as arising to the soul, since, as in the case of circumcision, the person is thereby brought into covenant with God. The Israelites, as a nation in covenant with God, were highly privileged: for ‘to them’, as the Apostle says, ‘belonged the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants’. . . . But we must distinguish between a change of state and a change of nature. Baptism is a change of state: for by it we become entitled to the blessings of the new covenant; but it is not a change of nature. A change of nature may be communicated at the time that the ordinance is administered; but the ordinance itself does not communicate it. . . . Simon Magus was baptised and yet remained in the gall of bitterness. . . . And so it may be with us; and this is an infallible proof, that the change which the Scriptures call the new birth does not of necessity accompany this sacred ordinance. . . . If only we will distinguish the sign from the thing signified, and assign to each its proper place and office, there will be an immediate end of this controversy “.¹²

In rather terse fashion Simeon once described his belief on this matter by saying, “I believe that Baptism is only the investing us with a right, which we shall not possess unless it is sued out by faith”.¹³ Thirty-nine years later the Privy Council decided, in the Gorham Case, that the opinions advocated by Simeon were consistent with faithful subscription to the doctrine and formularies of the Church of England. The detailed examination of the whole subject by Dean Goode offers an interesting example of the industry and learning that could be found amongst Evangelicals one hundred years ago.

This rapid survey may help us to understand the inner genius of the Evangelical Movement. Emphasis is laid on the work of God in the soul. Normally, the means by which He works are His Word and Sacraments. The effect of His work is to create an assurance of salvation; the knowledge that the sinner, humbly believing on our Lord Jesus Christ, is justified by faith. The ground of this hope is the testimony of Scripture to the work of the Saviour. As a consequence, the doctrine of the Atonement looms very large in the teaching, hymnology and writings of the period. The exaltation of the Person of Christ in all His saving power and the emphasis on the results of faith in Him were the cardinal features of the Evangelical message. The well known hymns, “Jesu, Lover of my soul” and “Rock of Ages”, express forcibly the heart of this preaching.

Did the Evangelicals in consequence—as is sometimes suggested—neglect the aspect of the corporate life of the Church, and remain indifferent to social reform? The answer to the first accusation is to be found in the amazing increase in Church attendance and in the reverent and continuous use of the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. Grimshaw, in his Yorkshire parish, used to reckon 300 to 400 communicants in winter and nigh on 1,200 in summer where formerly there were twelve.¹⁴ The second accusation has as little weight. The testimonies of J. R. Green, W. E. Lecky and G. W. E. Russell are well known. Perhaps it may be in point to cite the testimony of William Palmer, who is described by Newman as “the only really learned man amongst the early Tractarians”.¹⁵ Palmer states:

“In the midst of the triumph of infidel principle, when the world for a time found itself unbelieving . . . Christians in England set on foot the magnificent Christian work of the British and Foreign Bible Society, which undertook to circulate the Scriptures, without note or comment, in every nation under heaven. It was from Britain that this grand Christian movement—the great work of the nineteenth century, the supplement to Wesley’s great revival—arose. That bold aggressive movement made Christianity once more the teacher of the world—silent, indeed, but not less effectual. It was, as it were, another Pentecost, another preaching of the Gospel in all lands, even amongst its foes, a banner displayed in the face of an unbelieving world, an uplifting of the cardinal truths of the faith, a bold testimony patent to all men, that the human race still clung to the worship of the Creator and Saviour”.¹⁶

What Lecky describes as “the new and vehement religious enthusiasm”¹⁷ issued in the Abolition of Slavery, the founding of the Church Missionary Society, the establishment of the British and Foreign Bible Society, the creation of the Church Pastoral-Aid Society, the reform in factories, the establishment of Sunday Schools, the beginnings of general education, prison reforms—to mention some of the outstanding results. As Dr Overton well say: “It was not only Evangelicals but Evangelicalism that abolished the slave trade. The doctrines these men held compelled them to do the work”.

The practice of early morning Communion services arose through the Evangelicals. The innovation was not dictated by any theories as to the appropriate time to receive Holy Communion, but simply by the fact that the large attendances made additional services necessary. Similarly, it may be pointed out that the innovation of Evening Communion was introduced by Dean Hook, who has been called “a sober High Churchman”, solely with regard to the needs of the industrial community at Leeds. Galleries in churches were erected also at this time, owing to a strong utilitarian urge to accommodate the ever-increasing numbers who thronged the churches. The Evangelicals also were successful in establishing the habit of Family Worship. This quiet, persistent witness to the reality of God and His gracious concern for the daily duties of life and our attitude to them, struck deep into the hearts of those who were participants in the Family Worship.

Questions regarding ceremonial did not loom largely in the minds of the early Evangelicals, and there was some apathy towards ceremonial expression in the early days of the Tractarian Movement. Dr Pusey deprecated recourse to the assumed authority of the “Ornaments Rubric” to revive the distinctive dress proper to the Service of the Mass about 1840.¹⁸ He dreaded lest vanity might be at the root of the suggestions and contended that individuals had no authority to revive ceremonial. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Davidson, in giving evidence before the Royal Commission on Ritual,¹⁹ showed that even as late as 1843 “the Eastward Position” at Holy Communion was unheard of; but when Dr Pusey in 1874 declared, “The standing before the altar means the primitive doctrine of the Eucharistic Sacrifice, and the bowing after Sarum Use at Consecration means Eucharistic adoration”,²⁰ then Evangelicals felt compelled to enter a protest against a type of ceremonial that was openly declared to be significant of doctrines which they conscientiously believed had no sanction from the Word of God or the teaching of the Early Church; but both Tractarians and Evangelicals were disposed to insist more firmly on doctrine than on ritual.

IV

Two forces have mitigated the influence of the Evangelical Movement. The advent of a wave of so-called “Liberalism” has had the effect of alienating very many from anything in the nature of strong dogmatism. It would be unfair to exponents of this theological position to accuse them of returning to the cold Deism represented in Toland’s *Christianity Not Mystrious*; but it is possible to discover a certain movement in that direction. The view is confidently urged that religion is wholly a matter of experience and that any formulated principles of belief, beyond the demand that men should love the Lord Jesus in sincerity, have the effect of chilling devotion and inclining men towards censorious judgments on those who differ from them.

The result has been a weakening of personal conviction which has made many sit loose to the important question of their relation to God and our Lord Jesus Christ. Here again we have to notice that the logical consequence of a theory may be something widely separated from the ideas of its original promoters. This is due to the fact that premises are built up according to predilections and compensating considerations are overlooked. We are facing a period of apathy with regard to spiritual ideals, somewhat similar to that which confronted the pioneers of the Evangelical Revival. Liberalism has suffered such a severe shock in the two great world wars that there is an opening for the revived presentation of the foundation truths of the Gospel. It is a strange consequence from this new state of affairs that philosophers are heard urging that the “pessimistic view of human nature which is an element in the Christian outlook has in it a real perception of the truth”.²¹ The weakening of “Liberalism”, however, does not mean a return to the Evangelical conception. On the contrary, there is a strong desire on the part of many to substitute for the Gospel message of salvation from sin only through the power of the Son of God, “Who His own Self bare our sins in His own body on the tree”, a life of self-discipline, an outward conformity to certain moral and religious standards, a faith in meditation and the cultivation of high ideals.

The Evangelical may yet have to face the two forces of Humanism, with its message of salvation resident in the unfolding powers of man’s own nature, and Atheism—or, at least, Agnosticism—which repudiates the idea of a divine revelation. The one great weapon of aggressive attack must be the same weapon as our forerunners employed, “The sword of the

Spirit which is the Word of God". We cannot afford to diminish our witness, nor can we surrender any of the great vital truths that created, in the past, a vehement religious enthusiasm". There are not wanting evidences that the need is as great in these days and that the forces of spiritual truth are rallying to meet the need. The strong witness in our Universities of those who do not hesitate to range themselves actively on the side of a full Evangel has brought cheer to the hearts of close observers. The steady stream of Christian literature devoted to the ideals of man's renewal through the Atoning Sacrifice of Christ our Lord and the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit, is making its effect felt in many quarters.

There have been concessions to the demand for richness and variety in our services that sometimes seem to threaten the deeper realities of spiritual worship. It has, however, become apparent that something more than any form of external adornment or beauty is needed to revitalise the Church. Souls are still hungering for the bread of life, and the appeal for evangelism contained in the Report *Towards the Conversion of England* bears eloquent testimony to that fact. We can have no new message for a perishing world. God has uttered His voice concerning the only way of redemption from sin. We may, within reason, have new methods; but we cannot cease to proclaim unceasingly that there is a hope for the sinner, an assured peace of mind, only in the one Sacrifice once offered. Any suggestion "that the Church to-day is perpetuating by the activity of her priesthood the eternal offering of Calvary", diminishes the glory of a completed work and must be resisted. Any suggestion that human mediators can be given a place beside the One Mediator appointed of God must be emphatically rejected. Any form of devotion that obviates or seeks to obviate the entire dependency by faith on Jesus Christ our Lord must be eschewed, as robbing Him of the glory which is justly His. While no Evangelical would depreciate the divine character of the Sacraments, he cannot assign to them the place that the New Testament appropriates to Faith as a means of salvation. It is the conscious acceptance, in adoring submission, of God's rich provision of Grace that is the kernel of Christian experience, and it is the conscious knowledge of sins forgiven that is the dynamic of Christian witness.

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Endnotes:

- 1) Locke's *Essay On the Reasonableness of Christianity as Delivered in the Scriptures*, 1695.
- 2) *Journal*, May 24th, 1738.
- 3) *Epistle to the Galatians*, English translation by the Rev. Erasmus Middleton (Blake, Lincoln's Inn, 1836), p. xciv.
- 4) H. C. G. Moule, *Charles Simeon* (I.V.F., 1948), pp. 25, 26.
- 5) *Confessions*, Book VIII, xii. 29.
- 6) Preface to *The Psalms*.
- 7) *Analogy of Religion*, II, ch. 1.

- 8) *Hastings Encyclop. of Religion and Ethics*, Article “Methodism”.
- 9) *Charles Simeon*, ut. supra., p. 77.
- 10) Preface to Second Edition, printed in 1818.
- 11) *Charles Simeon*, ut. supra., p. 85.
- 12) *Ibid.*, p. 81.
- 13) *Ibid.*, p. 82.
- 14) J. C. Ryle, *Christian Leaders*, p. 127.
- 15) *Apologia*, p. 142.
- 16) W. Palmer, *Narrative of Events*, Second Edition, p. 17.
- 17) *History of England* (London, 1892), III, p. 146.
- 18) Liddon’s *Life of Pusey*, II, p. 140.
- 19) Vol. II. p. 357.
- 20) *Church Times*, June 19th, 1874.
- 21) See for example Huxley’s “Agnosticism”, *Nineteenth Century*, Feb. 1889.