Evangelical Doctrines and Modern Thought.[1]

By the Rev. J. A. HARRISS, M.A.

NO other source and no better expression of Evangelical doctrines can be found than in the Gospel message of the New Testament. Careful study of the characteristics of that message will show that "the Gospel," as the New Testament writers conceived of it, was a term of wide range and great significance. Ever and again, as local controversies or as special needs arose, it was necessary to emphasize some one important feature in order to guard against misconception. But the Gospel, considered in itself, was larger and fuller than any one doctrine. It comprised the whole body of Christian truth. It was the full revelation of the counsels of God. We are asked to-day to consider our Evangelical doctrines in relation to modern thought. Few of us who are trying to understand the currents that are influencing men can fail to see how strong is the tendency about us to comprehensiveness. In the spheres of science and of history, equally with those of moral and religious thought, there is a growing dissatisfaction on all sides at hasty or incomplete statements, and a steady movement towards a larger and completer marshalling of all the available facts.

Now, it is this principle that, I venture to suggest, we Evangelicals need to recognize more fully than, perhaps, some of us have done in the past. The Divine facts with which we have to do are there in the contents of the Gospel, and the field is a wide one. Are we applying the method of comprehension in interpreting the full truth there revealed? For, rightly or wrongly, a suspicion haunts the minds of many that the Evangelical school of thought does not stand for breadth of view; that while it is strong in its emphasis upon certain distinctive

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features, there are yet aspects of revealed truth which seldom find a place in its normal teaching. Let me recall the significant and searching words of Bishop Moule in his book on "The Evangelical School in the Church of England." He is referring to the rise of the Oxford Movement, and to some of the causes which contributed to its success. "Assuredly, too," he writes, "it found the Evangelical side affected already by some of the mischiefs of traditionalism, not careful enough to study progress, and mistaking formulas sometimes for life" (p. 30). Those who are familiar with the history of the Evangelical movement in the eighteenth century will know that its great power under God arose from its strong insistence upon certain distinctive truths that had become obscured, if not forgotten, amid the religious controversies of that period. The men who preached them reaped success, largely because their minds were alert to perceive the needs of their times. Those truths were, and always will be, primary in their importance. But the form in which they were then presented was necessarily marked with the limitations of the age, nor were they, perhaps, sufficiently comprehensive in range. And if there be a mere slavish reproduction of their teaching to a future generation, whose wants are different and larger, then the mischiefs to which Dr. Moule refers, of failing to study progress, of traditionalism, of mistaking formulas for life, will assuredly appear in our midst. In view, then, of the wide embrace of truth comprehended in the New Testament conception of the Gospel, it should greatly concern us to inquire whether we are really faithful to that comprehensive spirit; whether each feature and part of the teaching finds its right place in our thoughts and lives; or whether the tendency to isolate one doctrine or one fact from the rest, to wrest it out of its proper connexion with other facts, and to exalt it unduly above them as embodying, not together with them, but alone and in itself, the Gospel—whether that tendency, which, be it marked, is the temper to which many a heresy in the past owes its birth, does characterize our belief or our teaching.

There is another point of view from which we may regard this principle of comprehensiveness. We need to remember that the appeal which the Gospel makes to men is an appeal to the whole and not to part only of their nature.

Consider for a moment what is implied in such expressions as these: St. Paul speaks in one place of the "mystery of the Gospel" (Eph. vi. 19). In another he refers to the riches of God's grace, which the Gospel has made known, "abounding toward us in all wisdom and prudence" (Eph. i. 8, 13). In another of Christ crucified, as the wisdom of God (1 Cor. i. 24). In another of his endeavour to commend himself to every man's conscience by the manifestation of the truth (2 Cor. iv. 2).

Now, the terms here used—"mystery," "wisdom," "prudence," "truth"—carry us straightway to one special aspect of the appeal which the Gospel makes to men. It shows us that it has a distinctively intellectual side. It shows us that the Gospel, as St. Paul conceived of it, was intended to claim the allegiance of the reason as well as of the heart and conscience of men. The Gospel, indeed, is not only or chiefly an intellectual system. It is sometimes necessary to protest against that view, as St. Paul himself did in dealing with the lovers of intellectual display in Corinth. But neither does it disparage nor ignore the reasoning faculties, and any religious system that fails to recognize and to meet man's instinctive desire for certainty has within it the seeds of weakness, if not of decay.

A true conception of our principles, then, will lead us to aim at comprehensiveness in our appeal to the many-sided nature of man. His conscience has to be awakened and appeased, his heart stirred, his will inspired, and his mind quickened and satisfied. The whole man has to be won for God. Each office should claim a place in our methods.

Our present experience is forcing upon us the recognition of this claim. No one can know anything of the fortunes of the Evangelical party without acknowledging with regret the constant leakage that is going on from our ranks. Many men

who have received their training in Evangelical homes and amid Evangelical surroundings not unfrequently drop their connexion in after-years, and throw in their lot with the adherents of some other school of thought. Why is it so? Is there any truth in the charge often made against us that we are not strong on the side of mental culture? I do not say that in all cases this explanation holds good, but I do say that in many the reason is to be found in our failure to satisfy the craving of these men for light and guidance upon the vexed questions that come into our religious life to-day. A man may be quite sincere in his Christian profession, and yet by the natural working of his mind he is forced to attempt some explanation for himself of the terms of his religious belief. He cannot go on for long without definite convictions. And if he cannot find a satisfactory answer in the teaching of those with whom his lot was first cast, he will either take refuge in some other school, or drift on aimlessly through life with a mind still hungering for light.

We turn, then, to ourselves to ask whether we are sufficiently alive to this responsibility. There are not wanting signs to convince us that modern thought in its attitude towards the Christian faith is, with all its restlessness and daring, yet far healthier in tone and sincerer in motive than were many former types. Below its surface scepticism is a deep and pathetic longing for reality, but its rules are strict and its requirements are exacting. It has had a hard training in the severe methods of physical and historical science, and will not be put off with the husks of tradition or formalism. It is relentless in detecting and unsparing in condemning whatever is illogical or superficial. But it is prompted by a passion for truth, and it secretly knows that the truth of religion is the deepest and finest of all. It has listened in turn to the persuasions of agnosticism and ecclesiasticism, but with neither has it found rest. It wants to believe, but the cause that shall win its homage must be reasonable and sound in its appeal to the whole man. It is reported that an Oxford tutor once said, "The religion of the future will be a reasonable Evangelicalism."

For myself I am sanguine enough to believe that the principles we hold, if rightly presented, will go far to bridge the gulf between doubt and belief. But those principles have yet to be more fully explored before they yield their secrets, and the men who shall explore them at present seem to be few.

A further important conclusion to which our study leads us is that the Gospel is regarded by the New Testament writers as not only the full revelation of God, but also as a revelation that centres in the Person of our Lord Jesus Christ. Separate aspects of our Lord's work are sometimes spoken of as forming parts of the Gospel message, but there are many indications to show that behind those separate facts, and behind all the doctrines that may be drawn from them, there stood up in the minds of the writers the living Personality of our Lord, who embodies in Himself the true revelation of God and the true Gospel.

As illustrating this, let me remind you how St. Paul, in his first letter to Corinth, although forced by the exigencies of controversy to dwell upon the importance of the cross and the crucified Christ, yet passes quickly and naturally from that one feature to speak of the fuller truth of the personal Christ, who, as he says, was made unto us, "wisdom from God, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption" (1 Cor. i. 30). These doctrines gain all their force, and only so gain it, from their association with the Divine Person. Or, again, while in the opening verses of the Epistle to the Romans the Apostle names the two special facts of the Resurrection and the Incarnation in close connexion with the Gospel, yet the real contents of the message is "concerning His Son, even Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom. i. 3, 4). In the Epistle to the Galatians also the Apostle's Gospel to men was the echo of God's revelation to himself, and that revelation was the personal Divine Son. So he writes: "When it was the good pleasure of God to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach *Him* among the Gentiles" (Gal. i. 16).

You have already, doubtless, anticipated the obvious inference

that follows upon the recognition of this fact. It at once suggests to us that our Christian religion is not primarily a dogmatic system, nor a mere scheme of salvation, nor a code of ethics, but the realization, intensely vital and practical, of our relations with a Divine Person, the Son of God, through whom and in union with whom alone we gain all the privileges of our Christian position. Here, surely, if anywhere, "the faith of the Gospel," for which St. Paul bids men strive, consists (Phil. i. 27).

We should all agree at once to this conclusion. I am not so sure, however, whether we all quite see the extent of its application.

Mark Pattison concludes his essay on "Tendencies of Religious Thought in England during the Years 1688 to 1750" with these words:

"Whoever would take the religious literature of the present day as a whole, and endeavour to make out clearly on what basis Revelation is supposed by it to rest, whether on Authority, on the Inward Light, on Reason, on Self-Evidencing Scripture, or on the combination of the four, or some of them, and in what proportions, would probably find that he had undertaken a perplexing but not altogether profitless inquiry."

Within our own circle it is customary to attach the supreme authority in religion to the Holy Scriptures. The claims of the Church or of private judgment to determine what is essential in matters of faith and conduct are no less strongly urged by other schools of thought.

In our attitude towards these we assert that all such claims, before they can be admitted as valid and binding, must submit to be criticized and examined in the light of Scripture, of history, and of reason. They cannot be accepted simply because they claim to be authoritative. No one body of men, we maintain, however wise or however saintly its members, can be trusted to know the truth completely or to interpret it without risk of error. Moreover, we say, truth is a sacred and a personal possession. To be rightly apprehended, it must appeal to the faculty of

knowledge within a man, and gain from him his own voluntary and unforced response before it can become truth to him. On these grounds and by this method we accept or reject the various claims to authority that are brought under our review. Now, the principle of criticism that we adopt in testing others must obviously be allowed to apply to any form of authority that we ourselves may advocate. The claim of the Scriptures to be the sole and supreme authority in religion must, consistently, submit to the same kind of scrutiny to which other claims are subjected. When a man comes to you with some dogma, and requires you to accept it, because, as he says, the Church has decreed it, you answer at once: "I must first examine your dogma on its own merits. I must see what credentials it offers, which, apart from the authority that would enforce it, render it reasonable and worthy, before you can expect me to accept it."

In the same way, if we on our part put forward this or that teaching and say to men, "You must accept it without question, because it is recorded in Scripture, from which there can be no appeal," then we are employing a method which we refuse to allow others to employ. We are bringing into use a practice which we have already condemned.

The fierce criticism to which the books of the Old and New Testaments have been subjected for many years past is in reality only an extension of the same principles and methods by which, at the period of the Reformation, the claims of Rome were examined and found wanting.

And some of us are, at the present time, not a little concerned as to the line of thought which the Evangelical school, as a whole, means to take in regard to that wide and pressing movement that goes by the name of the Higher Criticism. We are asked by some of our number to adopt an attitude of uncompromising hostility to it. If, in support of this position, there were offered by its advocates irrefragable proofs that the movement was altogether erroneous, then hostility to it would be justified. But too often condemnation is pronounced, not

because its methods and conclusions have been proved to be mistaken, but because some preconceived view as to the authority and inspiration of Holy Scripture is said to forbid any criticism of its contents. On the other hand, there are some of our number who are trying at least to understand the movement, and find that some of the results to which it points have made the Sacred Book infinitely more precious to them, and its message clearer and fuller to their minds. Are we to tell such men, who desire to remain with us, that there is no place left for them within our ranks?

I would venture, therefore, to urge that we keep uppermost in our minds, in relation to this whole question, first, that the spirit of criticism is inevitable. I am not now speaking of results. They may be right or they may be wrong. But I am thinking rather of the spirit, the temper of mind, in which the matter should be approached. It would be nothing less than disastrous for us, as representing one of the historic schools of thought in our Church, to place ourselves out of sympathy with one of the ruling ideas of our age. We should find ourselves left, like some stranded derelict, on the shore, while the tide of progress flows past and away from us. Rather let us try at least to see what the meaning of this movement really is before we condemn it, and if there be good in it, to appropriate and use that good in our belief and service. Secondly, I would urge that we keep clear in our minds the necessary distinction between the Divine message contained in the Scriptures and the human agents through whom that message has come down to us. The Bible has, to use a familiar figure, both a body and a soul, and whatever critics may have to say about the manner, or the time, or the circumstances under which the various parts were penned, yet they cannot really touch, even if they wished, the sustained witness which those parts, taken together, present to the Divine revelation—the soul of the Book—contained within its pages. And, thirdly, I would urge that we remember, above all else, that it is the Person of our Lord, who ever lives and reigns, and not the Book, which witnesses to Him, sacred

as that is, that forms the centre and heart of the Gospel and of Evangelical truth. Neither the written word, nor the Church, nor the creeds, nor any one doctrine or body of doctrines, can ever hold the supreme place in the Christian faith assigned to its Divine Lord, nor give the knowledge, the life, and peace to the soul that comes alone from our fellowship with Him. To hold firmly to this central truth will give us, as I believe, if not the immediate solution, yet at least the clue to the ultimate solution of the vexed question of the basis of authority in religion.

The Parochial Clergyman's Special Perils.

By the Rev. R. C. JOYNT, M.A.

THEY are not a few who, I surmise, think that the clergyman has a life almost immune from the ills that the layman's flesh and spirit are heir to. They except, possibly, the missionary hero; but they hear such Scriptures as the Epistle for Sexagesima Sunday, and its tale of "necessities, distresses, stripes, imprisonments," and the rest, with an accompanying mental process of contrast between the Apostle's "perils" and the snug cosiness of the slippered pastor by the average vicarage fireside. The "parson" has, they will admit, one heavy day in the week; but for the other six his task is the care of a few classes, and ministry to such sick persons as are not so well educated as to be above the need of his pastoral counsel.

It is thought that he has no personal part as a combatant in the strenuous strife against temptation of various kinds which besets the less sheltered and less privileged men of commerce, labour and law. Added to this, has he not, it is supposed, immense spiritual endowments, which, like untainted sunbeams in fœtid air, will keep him from falling where frailer men may fail?

Alas! the object of all this misconception knows how far it