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The Position of the Evangelical in the Church of England.[1]

THE Oxford University Evangelical Church Society was founded to meet a great want among Evangelical Churchmen up here. It was felt that while we all knew why we were not High Churchmen, we were strangely ignorant as to why we were Evangelicals. In fact, the very name Evangelical is not understood by those who ought to glory in its splendid associations. One reason for the growth of the High Church party is that they define their position to a nicety. Their clergymen are well grounded in their doctrines and very wisely educate their congregations to know the why and the wherefore of their special tenets. The main reason, perhaps, of the crushing defeat of the Conservative party in the General Election of 1906 was the lack of any definite practical policy to put before the country. If, then, the Evangelical party in the Church of England has no real policy to put forward and forgets the reason for its existence, it must not complain of depleted ranks. The object of this paper will be, therefore, to answer the following questions:

1. What *is* an Evangelical?
2. What are the main tenets of the party?
3. What are the reasons for the existence of the party in the Church?
4. What is the future outlook?

In order to answer the first question it will be necessary to trace briefly the history of the latter part of the eighteenth century. England at this time was in a most deplorable condition. The general apathy seems to have set in with the Georgian era. The country was given up to drunkenness, cruelty, and immorality. The favourite amusements were bull-baiting, cock-fighting, and watching the Tyburn hangings. Thousands used to pay for seats on the grandstand at the Tyburn gallows to watch the contortions of the poor wretches as they slowly

[1] A paper read before the Oxford University Evangelical Church Society.

choked to death. Jack Sheppard and Dick Turpin, the famous highwaymen, were the heroes of the mob. The Church at this time, as can be imagined, was at a very low ebb of efficiency. In fact, Bishops very rarely went near their sees, and parishes were regarded as sources of income rather than spheres of labour.[1] Bishop Watson, for instance, was Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge, as well as being Bishop of Llandaff and Rector of no fewer than sixteen parishes in different parts of the country. The weekly services in the various churches were gabbled through by clergy who used to ride from church to church. When the weather was bad there was frequently no service at all. One Bishop of Carlisle who did venture to explore his diocese tells us that many of the churches were in ruins, and some were "more like pigsties than Houses of God."

Such, then, was the state of England and the Church when the Evangelical Revival took its rise.

Matthew Arnold has termed Oxford the "home of lost causes, and forsaken beliefs, and unpopular names."[2] We may agree with the last statement, but must take exception to the others. Both the Evangelical and Tractarian Movements had their beginning in Oxford, and who would say that either was a lost cause? Oxford, however, shared in the general lethargy of the times, and John Wesley, the future leader *par excellence* of the Revival, himself did not awake to the needs of the time till he was elected a Fellow of Lincoln College.

"In November, 1729," wrote John Wesley in his "Short History of Methodism," "four young gentlemen of Oxford—Mr. John Wesley, Fellow of Lincoln, Mr. Charles Wesley, student of Ch. Ch., Mr. Morgan, commoner of Ch. Ch., and Mr. Kirkham of Merton College, began to spend some evenings in a week together in studying chiefly the Greek Testament." These meetings in John Wesley's rooms at Lincoln soon got noised about the University. They had to endure much perse-

[1] Balleine, "A History of the Evangelical Party," p. 11.
[2] Preface to "Essays in Criticism," by Matthew Arnold.

cution and ridicule. Many nicknames were coined for them, such as "Bible Moths," "Holy Club." By their methodical ways for study, Bible reading, and prayers, they were styled Methodists. Henceforth anyone who tried to throw off the general apathy of the times and who threw in his lot with those who desired to revive a religion of earnestness and spirituality was termed a Methodist. The members of the Holy Club did not keep their religion to themselves, but used to visit the poor prisoners in Oxford Castle. Here the state of the prison reflected the barbarism of the period, for "men and women, debtors and felons, were crowded together all day ; at night the women were driven to a dungeon without either windows or beds, to sleep on filthy straw that had been left by friends of previous prisoners." [1] Needless to say, the place was rarely free from infectious diseases. Wesley and his friends used to hold services there daily, and help the poor wretches by showing practical sympathy in raising a fund to release those who were imprisoned for small debts. Although their numbers were very few—in fact they dwindled to five—they were joined soon by George Whitefield, of Pembroke, the future orator of the Revival. At the end of a year the members of the club were scattered. It is interesting to note that the two Wesleys went to America as S.P.G. chaplains, while Whitefield took a curacy. At this period the future leaders of the Evangelical Revival were distinctly High Churchmen in their doctrine and ascetic in their practice of religion. John Wesley was especially zealous for the due carrying out of the Church's rubrics, but his audience in America were not so appreciative, and he returned to England conscious of his failure. It was at this time that Whitefield began to realize that Christianity in all its fulness means an implicit trust in Christ as our Redeemer and Saviour. Like the Wesleys, he had tried by asceticism and vain strivings of his own to find peace with God. He was just recovering from an illness brought on by excessive fasting during Lent when something happened. That something was conversion. "Oh, with what joy," he

[1] Balleine, "A History of the Evangelical Party," p. 4.

writes in his journal, "joy unspeakable, was my soul filled when the weight of sin went off, and an abiding sense of the pardoning love of God and a full assurance of faith broke in upon my disconsolate soul! Surely it was the day of my espousals—a day to be held in everlasting remembrance." The earnestness of Whitefield's preaching henceforward, and the enormous crowds who went to hear him, aroused the other members of the Holy Club. They recognized that he possessed a power over men which they somehow lacked, although they were very keen themselves. That power was the only power which set England aflame at this time or can ever inspire others to turn to Christ—viz., a deep-set conviction of the efficacy of Christ's atoning death for all the sins of fallen man. From now onwards he was "a new creature" infused with the life of Christ, and people recognized this. Charles Wesley now began to see that he had been striving to save himself and not trusting to Christ. He was much struck by the holy life of a man with whom he lodged, whom he styled "a poor ignorant mechanic who knows nothing but Christ."

To cut a long story short, both Charles and John Wesley, after much striving for a realization of the peace which had come to George Whitefield's soul, at last found it. The word "conversion" nowadays has got into bad repute. Perhaps it is because it is thought to be bad taste for a man to admit that he has had a crisis in his spiritual life, or more possibly in Oxford because of the dread of letting people see that you are enthusiastic in anything. Converted people cannot help being enthusiastic, for they feel bound to tell others what Christ has meant to them. All men have not the same nature, and while some can slue round their whole wills to God in a moment, with others it is a gradual process. "The will can in most cases be pictured as a fluid thing, which flows up to Christ in some great moment. It touches Him, and inevitably receives virtue so long as it is in contact."[1] With the leaders of the Evangelical Revival their wills seem to have been united to Christ's all along,

[1] R. C. Gillie, "Evangelicalism," p. 31 *f.*

for when once they had realized the power of the Cross their lives were fully consecrated to their Saviour. It is pathetic in the extreme to read of the effect that Whitefield's preaching had on the miners of his parish at Kingswood, near Bristol.[1] In his journal he reports that his congregation often numbered about 20,000 people, who came to hear him from far and near. Some used to stand on coaches, others used to climb up trees to hear him better. Many of the burly miners could be seen with white gutters on their black cheeks made by tears. John Wesley was very reluctant at first to take up field-preaching, and writes that he used to think "the saving of souls almost a sin, if it had not been done in church."[2] Soon, however, field-preaching was taken up with great zeal by all the Methodists. They suffered much persecution from the mob at various places, and John Wesley relates how after one meeting he was covered with blood. The chief aim of the preaching was "to conquer, to compel men then and there to renounce sin and to seek for pardon at the Cross of Christ."[3] Another characteristic of these huge meetings was hymn-singing. If Whitefield was the orator and John Wesley the organizer of the movement, Charles Wesley's chief work was as the writer of its hymns. It must have been inspiring to hear a congregation of 20,000 sing such beautiful hymns as "Jesu, Lover of my soul"; "Christ the Lord is risen to-day"; "Love Divine, all loves excelling"; "Soldiers of Christ, arise." Besides these of Charles Wesley's, the movement produced other fine hymns, such as Toplady's "Rock of Ages" and Perronet's "All hail the power of Jesu's name!" Later on, of course, the movement had the poet Cowper at its disposal, who wrote such popular hymns as "Hark, my soul, it is the Lord"; "There is a fountain filled with blood"; "God moves in a mysterious way." His great friend John Newton, whose work we shall touch upon soon, also wrote many favourite hymns, among which we may men-

[1] Bristol was then the second city of the kingdom.
[2] Journal, entry for March 29, 1739.
[3] Balleine, "A History of the Evangelical Party," p. 24.

tion: "How sweet the Name of Jesus sounds!" and "Glorious things of thee are spoken."

With such able leaders, the Revival soon spread over England, and men's lives were rapidly changed, for they were shown that a man might assent to the Three Creeds of the Church and hold the orthodox opinions on doctrine, and yet have no Christian faith at all.

Now, one thing needs explanation at this point, and that is that the two Wesleys were very strong Churchmen; and when many of the followers of the movement got disgusted with the apathy of the ordinary clergyman of the Church, John Wesley urged them to bear up and wait till the times changed. "I live and die a member of the Church of England," he wrote on his death-bed, "and none who regard my judgment or advice will ever separate from it."[1] His brother Charles was even more zealous for the old Church, and wrote in his Journal: "I warned them of the wiles of the devil, whereby he would draw them away from the Church and other means of grace."[2]

Other men were not so strong as they were, and could not stand the bitter hostility of the parochial clergy, and gradually drifted into Dissent and established a Methodism outside the Church. We find such pamphlets issued as, "A Full Discovery of the Horrid Blasphemies taught by those Diabolical Seducers called Methodists." The term "Evangelical" had been applied to adherents of the spiritual revival as a term of reproach, but, like the case of the disciples at Antioch who were mocked as being χριστιάνοι, and afterwards adopted the appellation, in due time it came to be accepted as a suitable title for the movement. The name "Methodist" then gradually became confined to the seceders, while Churchmen who were affected by the Revival were termed "Evangelicals."

The work of subsequent leaders of the Revival is exceedingly interesting, but time forbids us to do more than mention a few points about them. At first they were barred from holding

[1] In an article in the *Arminian Magazine*, April, 1790.
[2] Charles Wesley's Journal, October 18, 1756.

livings by Bishops, who looked on them as too "enthusiastic" for religion, and full of "diabolical teaching" on such subjects as justification by faith. Great prejudice was heaped on William Romain, of London, because his congregation was composed of "a ragged, unsavoury multitude!" This cleric was for thirteen years "the only representative of the party beneficed North of the Thames." The Evangelicals, however, made use of the institution of afternoon lectureships at various churches. A few of these lectureships remain to the present day, as, for instance, at Bradford and Bolton. William Grimshaw was a typical Evangelical clergyman after his conversion. Formerly his piety consisted in "refraining from gross swearing unless in suitable company," and in taking care to sleep out his drunken bouts. When he had come to realize in himself the great Evangelical doctrine of the Atonement, he was perforce a changed man. Henceforward his one aim in life was to "preach Christ and Him crucified," and thereby to win souls for Christ. Every day he held a prayer-meeting at five in the morning in his church at Haworth, near Bradford. When John Wesley rode over to Haworth, he mentions that they had a tremendous congregation at the service at which he preached, and nearly 1,000 communicants. Grimshaw, like Wesley, was a strong Churchman, as, indeed, the real Evangelicals were and are nowadays, although they suffer much at the present time through being confused with Low Churchmen. The latter name was first given to Whig Latitudinarian clergy in the early part of the eighteenth century. These people, unlike the Evangelical leaders, disliked the Church's Creeds and Articles, and were more like what we now call Broad Churchmen. They rather scorned at a belief in revelation or in miracles. They hated the Methodists and Evangelicals even more than did the orthodox High Churchman. At the present time the name "Low Churchman," has lost this original meaning, and stands for those Churchmen who "hold 'lower' views of the Church, the ministry, and the Sacraments than seems consistent with the plain teaching of the Prayer-Book, and are not careful to

observe its directions."[1] Their services are slovenly, and not carried out with that decency and order which is becoming to the true worship of God.

Reference has been made to John Newton, the hymn-writer. This man was a great asset to the party, for, like St. Augustine, he had turned away from a past life of wickedness to serve Christ with an earnestness and devotion which fired the enthusiasm of others. His greatest work, at Olney, in Bucks, was done in his visiting, for, knowing the awfulness of sin, he had the greatest sympathy for the sinner. It was the prayer-meetings which Newton held that caused him and his friend Cowper to write so many hymns.[2] This, we might mention, is *a great characteristic of Evangelicalism—the belief in corporate prayer.* Could anything be more Scriptural than the meeting together of fellow-Christians to pray for one another and offer up heartfelt petitions to the Almighty? And yet, even among so-called Evangelicals[3] at the present day, a man is rather made fun of if he is known to frequent prayer-meetings. Surely there is something wrong somewhere if this is the case! The great power of these old Evangelical leaders lay in their strong belief in prayer. If we allow corporate prayer to be pushed into the background or neglected altogether, then Evangelicalism will lose its old power over the people. It will in time only stand for certain beliefs, assent to which can no more save a soul from the power of sin than the counting of beads or a Chinese prayer-wheel.

W. Newton Hudson.

[1] Bishop Denton Thompson, "Central Churchmanship," p. 13.

[2] Cowper came to live at Olney, and although he was a recluse and shy through bodily ailments, struck up a great friendship with Newton.

[3] This is so in Oxford, at any rate.

(*To be concluded.*)