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A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_churchman\\_os.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php)

## THE BASIS OF SPIRITUAL REARMAMENT

### “THE WORD OF RECONCILIATION.”

By the Rev. A. ST. JOHN THORPE, M.A.

*Vicar of Watford.*

THE Basis of Spiritual Rearmament, which is the subject allotted to me may be summed up in one word—Truth. “What is Truth?” said jesting Pilate, and did not wait for an answer.’ So does Bacon interpret the mind of the famous Roman procurator. But it is in no spirit of jesting and impatience that we apply ourselves to this question, vitally related as it is to the subject of this Conference. Pilate with more truth than he realized answered his own question when he said, “Behold the man,” thus endorsing our Lord’s words, “I am the Truth.” From this we may say truth is an eternal principle perfectly demonstrated in our Lord Jesus Christ, and so cannot be static, in the sense of belonging to any one generation, but to all men, even as He is the Son of Man to whatever age or clime man belongs. It remains therefore to each succeeding generation to contribute its own interpretation of truth to the practice of life in its own day. As the rays of the sun bring out the varied colouring of a stained glass window, and I understand in the case of the best coloured glass, shine through it without being coloured by the glass through which they shine, so truth is unchanged by changing generations, but when applied brings out the beauty of colouring peculiar to each. To make this point is essential to all clear thinking. Truth being eternal is unchanging, what was truth yesterday cannot be error to-day. So truth is not coloured by the thought of any age, but the characteristic thought of every age is made bright by the truth. When the sun’s rays are strongly coloured by the stained glass through which they pass, it is a sign, I am told, of inferior coloured glass ; and when truth takes on the colour of one age or another it is evidence of the inferiority of the age which attaches to truth a colouring which does not belong to it. I wonder if the religious movements of to-day tend in this way to show their inferiority to the great movements of the past ? All will agree that in Christ we see truth personified, so to know Christ is to know the Truth, as revealed in the simplicity of the Gospel records. This simple record of the truth demonstrated in the equally simple but heroic faith of the early Christians was discoloured in the Middle Ages by the multi-coloured doctrines of an apostate Church, the inferiority of whose spiritual life was shown by the errors it foisted on an ignorant people in the name of truth. The revival of true religion came with the circulation of the Holy Scriptures through the pen of John Wycliffe and the

Renaissance, which opened the gates of new learning to scholars and once more released the truth. Not a new truth, but the truth as seen in and taught by our Lord Jesus Christ, which shone through the new learning of the fifteenth century, bringing about the Reformation. In this case it was the unchanging truth shining upon a changing age which brought about the spiritual re-armament of the sixteenth century. The Wesleyan Revival is traced to the release of truth through the teaching and personality of John Wesley and others associated with him, whereby men were convicted of the gross sins of a vicious materialism and led in thousands to repentance and change of conduct. But it was the same truth as seen in and taught by Christ. Wesley was the glass through which it shone in all its purity, bringing revival wherever it penetrated. And in every revival of true religion, in whatever part of the world it takes place, the same facts are borne out, for it is the truth that makes us free. And not only is this so in regard to Mass movements, but it is true in individual experience. I remember, some years ago, sitting with others around the sick bed of a public man, prominent in Christian circles, when he told us that at a stage in his illness when he was not expected to live and doctors and relatives were waiting by his bed for the end to come, there was only one thing that really mattered as life seemed to be drawing to its close ; and that was 'his knowledge of and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. How simple and how true. Again, Dr. Bell, the Bishop of Chichester, in his *Life of Randall Davidson, Archbishop of Canterbury*, in describing the closing scenes of his life writes :

" The Archbishop of Canterbury asked for his blessing ; he knelt by the bedside and asked him to put his hands on his head : then the words came :

' God give you judgement (*repeated twice*),  
 God give you mercy,  
 God give you peace.'

" After that he was quiet for a little. Later in the evening he blessed his household. At the close of his blessing he added very faintly, ' We come to Thee in thankfulness and love ; we come in trustfulness, simplicity and peace—but always simplicity ' " (Vol. II., p. 1379).

The simple truth as seen in Christ is that which satisfies the human heart in the hour of its deepest need and so must form the basis of all vital spiritual re-armament.

Having said so much by way of introduction to the subject of where truth is to be found, viz. : In Christ through the Holy Scriptures ; a two-fold question arises, How is truth to be found, and when found how applied? My answer to the first part of this question is by a more simple use of the Word of God. During the last half century there have been many additions to our knowledge about the text of Holy Scripture, so that to-day we are nearer to the text of the originals than in any age since the second century A.D.

Fifty years ago there were no known MSS. older than the Codex Vaticanus and the Codex Sinaiticus, which are dated between 300—350 A.D. Hence there was a gap of 250 years between these earliest MSS. and the original composition of the books. What is the position

to-day? Sir F. G. Kenyon, a Trustee of the British Museum, tells us that through the discovery of Greek papyrus MSS. in Egypt, a new chapter of textual history commences. As recently as 1931, Bible MSS. on papyrus were discovered ranging from the second to the fourth centuries, containing parts of the Old and New Testaments. Of the New Testament we possess one volume dating from 200—250 A.D., and although it is imperfect, it contains sufficient of the four Gospels and the Acts to show the general character of the text. Another MS. dating from about 200 A.D. contains the Pauline Epistles, omitting the Pastoral Epistles; and a third dated a little later containing one third of the Book of the Revelation. From these recent discoveries the gap between our earliest MSS. and the original publication of the books is reduced by 100 or 150 years. In 1935 a bundle of papyrus was discovered in the John Rylands Library at Manchester, which contained a scrap of the Fourth Gospel dated about 150 A.D. This recent evidence brings us within 50—150 years of the original publications.

The reason I mention this is because I welcome the gains to scholarship of recent years, the value of which it would be foolish to minimize, but I would point out that neither the Reformers nor Wesley had so much knowledge, which fact did not hinder revival and spiritual rearmament coming through them. If increased knowledge is a primary factor in revival then we ought to have had within recent years a spiritual awakening comparable to the great religious movements of the past. But what are the facts? A Recall to Religion has been sounded with all the authority of organized religion in this country behind it; but it failed to have anything like the influence of the International Crisis of last September in drawing people into our Churches. There is a vast difference between knowledge and truth, and in spite of our increasing knowledge we seem to be losing our grip of truth.

In this respect may we not learn a lesson from Daniel and his three friends of whom we read, "God gave them knowledge and skill in all learning and wisdom" (Dan. i. 17), and again, "In all matters of wisdom and understanding, that the king enquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and astrologers that were in all his realm" (Dan. i. 20). Yet upon reading of their influence for God one is forced to the conclusion that their learning did not change the simplicity of their trust in God; and it was their simple faith and not their extensive knowledge which God honoured. I wish there were more such men to-day, for there is a real danger lest with much learning there comes less faith and a loosening of the grip of truth. The Reformation re-established the truth without any compromise with error. The language and meaning of the 39 Articles make this clear, in spite of the claim of those who would have us believe they are nothing more than the expression of a local and passing religious controversy. But to-day Conferences spend hours in trying to construct phrases which will bear the interpretation of diametrically opposed schools of thought representing respectively, doctrines which at the Reformation stood truth and error; in the false hope that

such wording will bring unity, and so release the Church from controversy and give her fresh power for evangelism. But spiritual rearmament cannot come by hiding essential differences under a patchwork cloak of comprehensive phrases. No ! Simplicity (which is not synonymous with ignorance), simplicity not compromise is our great need. Simplicity of faith. A simple acceptance, apart from all theories of inspiration, which language will never satisfactorily define, of the Holy Scriptures as the Word of God and the rule of life. To our fathers the Bible was the Word of God and as such they applied it to the needs of men, which gave them an authority carrying conviction. And anyone who has practical experience of personal soul-winning work to-day, knows that is the only way to use the Bible and teach the Truth.

And now we come to the second part of our two-fold question—How is the truth to be applied ? Although the application of truth will be through methods which are bound to vary with succeeding generations, a fact which the more conservative of us must recognize if we are going to reach the young people of to-day, yet there are certain basic principles which I believe are essential to every age. One of the more simple changes we need to recognize in the application of truth is that of language. Some of us have been brought up in a phraseology which carries to our minds certain religious meanings with which we are familiar and which immediately challenge our thought. But much of such phraseology is quite unknown to many of the younger generation. Not long ago I was speaking to a young person in her twenties with a view to her baptism, and in trying to get down to her beliefs and personal experience I deliberately enquired if she would understand me if I asked her if she had ever been converted. To which she replied she would not, because she did not know what the word meant. Now part of the reason for this non-understanding of what to us are familiar religious terms is because of an appalling ignorance of the Bible. And this is true of the so-called educated classes as well as of the poor and less privileged members of the community. To the Victorians, Bible teaching was given in Bible language, but to-day we must give Bible teaching in modern language if we are to bring about any sort of Spiritual Rearmament and preach The Word of Reconciliation, which the people will understand. From these few remarks on the importance of the language in which we present the truth, let us turn to the question of How truth is to be applied ? And I wish to try and answer it under three headings.

### **Firstly : Through the Expository Preaching of the Word of God.**

With the growth of emphasis on sacramentalism there has been a corresponding tendency to minimize the importance of preaching. A friend of mine was visited by a brother cleric, who, while looking over his church, asked what sort of congregations he had on Sundays ; and was told the church was nearly full. In great surprise the visitor asked how it was done, for his own church was nearly empty, and on being told by my friend that he tried to preach the Gospel, said he did not think people went to church for the sermon, so he never took much trouble over it. We all know people should go to church to

worship God, but if the sermon is treated as a negligible part of worship, not worthy of serious preparation, people will not go to church. And as regards the matter of the sermon, I am sure we need more expounding of the Word of God, and such teaching is all the more necessary in view of the ignorance that is abroad concerning the contents of the Bible. Such preaching if compared with more popular styles, is not so spectacular in its results, and possibly less attractive to the average church-goer and nominal Christian. But it is better to instruct the few in their responsibility to the truth, that they in turn may teach others, than it is to interest mildly a crowd that does nothing. I was speaking the other day to a young missionary, a churchman, who said he knew of a case where a parson had been many years in a parish exercising a teaching ministry without much apparent result. Almost against his will he was persuaded to have a mission, and the consequence was a wonderful reaping because of the years of faithful sowing and nurturing in the truth. A missionary is often invited to take a mission in a parish as a last resort ; and little or nothing happens because there is no knowledge in the minds of his hearers on which he can base his appeal. I think it is true to say every revival of true religion has sprung from the positive and personal application of doctrines taught in the Word of God about sin and redemption, and not from a moral appeal to man to develop what is best in him. A big contribution which Evangelicals might make to the spiritual life of the nation is to plan a Bible Teaching Campaign in conjunction with a strong Evangelistic Drive.

But what Evangelicals might do in view of our past history and emphasis on special and vital aspects of the Truth ; and what we are failing to do, should make us ask : Why are we not more effective ? One answer is found in our unhappy divisions, which I am told, alas ! are as evident among younger Evangelicals as those of an older generation. Our presentation of Truth, which is simple and dignified, is that which appeals to the average Englishman ; how is it therefore that we have been jockeyed out of positions in the Church which we held half a century ago ? and are we content to leave things in the unbalanced state in which they are at present ? This Conference will have accomplished much if some representative committee is set up to thrash out the possibility of (1) Evangelical Unity, or failing that ; (2) The formation of two strong groups, in one or other of which all Evangelicals would find real fellowship. To go on divided, as we are, into little coteries gathered around the names of different individuals, which create confidence, suspicion or neither as the case may be, is worse than useless. We have more than any other school of thought, not *a* but *the* contribution to make to the life of the Church, which she needs, and we should lose no time in putting our house in order to discharge our peculiar responsibility.

### **Secondly : Through the Power of the Holy Spirit.**

In a recent review of Karl Barth's book, *The Holy Ghost and the Christian Life*, I read this passage which I quote at some length, because it not only deals with the subject of this sub-heading, but links

it with what I have just said about the Word of God. The writer says :

“ When we ask the question, What is the Christian life ? we are bound to answer that Christian life is human life that has been made open by the Holy Ghost to receive God’s Word. In revelation both the giving and the receiving are of God—God graciously gives the living Word, but man is incapable unassisted of hearing it aright. ‘ It is not within the compass of any cleverness or ability of mine ; but it is purely and simply the office of the Holy Ghost to be continually opening our ears to enable us to receive the Creator’s Word.’ This is sound Reformation teaching, though somewhat obscured in our day. As Robertson Smith so nobly phrased it : ‘ If I am asked why I receive Scripture as the Word of God, I answer with all the Fathers of the Protestant Church, “ Because the Bible is the only record of God’s redeeming love.” And this record I know to be true by the witness of His Spirit in my heart, whereby I am assured that none other than God Himself is able to speak such words to my soul.’ Further, the special work of the Holy Ghost arises out of the fact that the Creator and the created spirit are in conflict. The ‘ holiness ’ of the Holy Ghost is expressive of His opposition to sin. He is not simply the spirit of the true, the beautiful, and the good, but is the spirit of Reconciliation striving against man’s hostility in the battle and victory of grace. Here Barth is anxious to guard against the error of synergism in every shape and form. The free will of man is not the pivot on which turns his relation to God. The decisive fact is that the Holy Spirit of God is at work conquering that sin which is essentially hostility to itself, and reconciling sinful man to God. He will not allow man’s creative action, but only God’s free grace, to determine decisively the event.”

... “ In accordance with this it must be maintained that the Christian life is from first to last a life in the Holy Spirit. Just as the saving work of Christ is complete apart from any working of ours, so the Holy Ghost, being the Spirit of Christ, is alone the efficient cause of the new life. This is true of all the constituents of that life, whether in its repentance, its faith, or its obedience. It is the Holy Ghost who reproves and convicts of sin. Man will not convict himself, for he does not know himself as a sinner. The knowledge of the content of the word ‘ Sin ’ is God’s work. ‘ Sin, in itself, is obviously never at all this or that act, on which one could lay his finger ; but it is solely resistance to God’s law, opposition to His gracious pronouncement of acquittal and guilt.’ It is essentially self-reliance and self-esteem which resent the accusations of God’s Word, and which refuse always to live by God’s forgiving mercy. ‘ This is unbelief, this is really sin. In comparison with this sin, all the rest do not matter so much, for this unbelief is the most critical sin of all sins.’ The conviction of this can come only by the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart.”<sup>1</sup>

Whether we go all the way with Karl Barth or with this reviewer’s interpretation of his book or not, we must agree that his restored emphasis on divine grace is a healthy corrective to much of the unbalanced humanism of to-day. It seems to me we talk a lot about the work of the Holy Spirit these days, but in actual fact place the cart before the horse when we put so much effort into organization as though that were a first condition of power, to find only too often, we have insufficient power to drive the mass of organized machinery. The fact is those simple New Testament conditions of spiritual power such as faith, obedience and prayer are neglected ; and without these there will be no power and no spiritual results to justify our organization. For spiritual rearmament we need the power of the Holy Spirit,

<sup>1</sup> *Expository Times*. Feb. 1939, pp. 196-7.

which is God's Gift to the one or many who fulfil the conditions of obedience, faith and prayer. Let us therefore sincerely and humbly seek the power of the Holy Spirit, without which there can be no output to organize.

### **And Thirdly : Through Sanctified Personality.**

God does His work through men and women chosen and prepared by His Spirit. I have every sympathy with those who feel Evangelicals have been unfairly treated in the matter of Ecclesiastical promotion, but such treatment, however unjust, has no power to hold up spiritual re-armament, as the days of Wesley prove. It really matters very little to God whether there are any Evangelicals on the Episcopal Bench or not, or whether there is an Episcopal Bench at all. At least so I gather from history, for T. W. Bready in his book, *England : Before and After Wesley*, writes : " Incredible as is the fact, to the end of the eighteenth century, and for more than a decade into the nineteenth, the Religious Awakening that saved the soul of England had not a single representative on the Episcopal Bench," and he continues, " For until the second decade of the nineteenth century Evangelicals, as such, were all but unrepresented in the higher Councils of the Church " (p. 59). G. R. Balleine in his book, *A History of the Evangelical Party*, also writes of the same period, " As the century closes, we see the Evangelicals in London excluded from all but three of the livings " (p. 63). I say this because until recently I felt strongly that Evangelicals would accomplish little until they gained more influence in the Councils of the Church, and I still feel we have a big contribution to make to the Church's life, but I am persuaded this is of minor importance in the matter of immediate Spiritual Rearmament and that our primary need is neither Episcopal influence nor even Party organization, but individuals chosen and prepared of God, such as was John Wesley, the tide of whose influence on the nation's character could not be held back by lack of Episcopal favour or by royal and political displeasure. In fact nothing can keep back the flood tide of divine blessing if in the fullness of God's time there are found men and women who know the truth, ready at all costs to do God's Will. And this is the fundamental basis of Spiritual Rearmament.

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Several books have appeared in recent times dealing with Nicholas Ferrar and the Community of Little Gidding in the seventeenth century. One of these which gives an interesting insight into the life of those associated with Ferrar is Mr. A. L. Maycock's *Nicholas Ferrar of Little Gidding* (S.P.C.K., 12s. 6d. net). Some new material has been at the author's disposal and he has used it to advantage in his account of the Ferrar family and of the Community of which Nicholas was the founder. Many are familiar with Little Gidding from the account given of it in *John Inglesant*. In an appendix Mr. Maycock gives an account of Shorthouse's extraordinary book, and of its author's method of composition. Mr. Maycock gives an historical record which will be read with great interest by all who care for the Church life of England in the seventeenth century.