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Where are We ?

(WRITTEN IN 1879.)

The REV. J. C. RYLE.

(This article is reprinted from the first volume of "The Churchman". It was written just 60 years ago.

Ryle was of course later Bishop of Liverpool.)

WHAT is the state and condition of the Evangelical body in the Church of England? This is a question which demands special attention just now. Where are we? What is our present condition? What are our future prospects? Let us see if we can supply an answer to these inquiries.

Whatever the cause may be, there is no doubt that the eyes of the public have lately been concentrated on the Evangelical body in a very marked and peculiar manner. When our late gallant champion, Dr. M'Neile, died, the *Times* at once contained a leading article declaring that Evangelicalism was worn out, decaying, and passing away. We were useful, forsooth, at one time; but we are played out, and our usefulness is at an end! When the probable sale of Exeter Hall was recently reported, the *Saturday Review* coolly informed its readers that this was a symptom of our decline, ignoring the notorious fact that the tide of fashion has run westward since the hall was built, and that the famous great room in the Strand at best is a most inconvenient, awkward place of meeting, with means of entrance and egress disgracefully insufficient, and far too long tolerated by the authorities. *The Church Times* continually tells the public that there is not a single real theologian in the Evangelical School—nobody, of course, being a theologian who does not agree with the *Church Times*! *The Guardian* gives us occasionally some faint praise, but never ceases to remind us that our views are sadly defective, and that our system does not meet the times. Mr. Gladstone in the

British Quarterly; Mr. Lecky in the *Nineteenth Century*; Dr. Lang in the *Catholic Presbyterian*, all have been writing about us lately, and making us a text for articles of various kinds, tendencies, and proclivities.

I suppose we ought to feel much flattered by the amount of attention we are receiving, and the proofs supplied, that our existence is a great fact which cannot be ignored. We evidently live, and move, and have a being in the Church of England. But surely when the fierce light of public opinion is turned so fully upon us, it is common prudence to review our position, and see how we stand. If there are any real symptoms of decay in the Evangelical body, let us look them fairly in the face, and know what they are. If there are no such symptoms, let us show cause for our confidence. To bring the matter to a definite point, let us look back over the last fifty years, and compare the position of the Evangelical body at the end of that period with the position which it occupied in 1829.

It may clear the way if I remind my readers that the state of things as to religious parties within the Church of England has undergone a complete change since 1829. At that date it is not too much to say the Evangelical body formed the only distinct party of any activity within our pale, and that it had almost a monopoly of the life and zeal of the Establishment. No doubt from the days of Bishop Hooper and the Vestiarian controversy there were always two Schools, a "High" and a "Low" School of thought, among our clergy. But in 1829 the immense majority of Churchmen took very little interest in religious matters beyond a formal use of the Church's services, and perhaps the only bond of union among them, with a few bright exceptions, was a common dislike to Evangelical principles and practices, and to all who followed them. In short, outside the Evangelical body, as a general rule, sleepiness and apathy was the order of the day. I need hardly say that this Bœotian state of things has utterly and entirely passed away.

Within the last fifty years two other distinct and active Schools of thought, beside the Evangelical, have crystallized and come into existence. I mean, of course, the High Church and the Broad Church. Each of these two Schools has its own distinctive opinions, and makes its mark on the nation. Each has attracted round it

numerous adherents, each has also its own peculiar phraseology, its own literature, and its own organs in the press. Each party is rich in preachers, speakers, and writers, and zealous in pushing and maintaining its own views. Not least, each of the two can show as much laboriousness and diligence in ministerial work as we can ourselves, however much we may think it misdirected. The logical tendencies of the two parties at first sight seems to be in diametrically opposite directions. High Churchmen who push their principles to legitimate conclusions seem in danger of returning to Rome, and swallowing the creed of Pope Pius IV. Broad Churchmen who go all lengths seem likely to give up all creeds, and articles, and dogmas as fetters, and to cast them overboard like useless lumber. Within these three great Schools in 1879 the greater part of the energy and life of the Church will be found ranged.

The modifications, and subdivisions, and shades, and half-tones of these three great Schools of thought are so many and so delicate that I cannot pretend to enumerate them. Their name is legion. There are honest, old-fashioned High Churchmen of the School of Andrewes. There are equally honest Broad Churchmen of the School of Burnet. There are Ritualists, pure and simple, who make no secret of their dislike to Protestantism. There are Evangelical Ritualists, and Ritualistic Evangelicals. There are Broad Church Evangelicals, and Evangelical Broad Churchmen, and Broad Church Ritualists. There are Eclectics, who try to pick a tit-bit out of every School, and partly agree with none, and partly agree with all. There are some zealous and active Churchmen who hold such rabidly outrageous opinions that, like the fly in amber, you wonder how they are in the Church at all, and why they do not go to their own places. There are some decidedly non-Evangelical men who really work so hard, and preach so much truth, that you feel "*Cum talis sis utinam noster esses!*" There are other zealous fellows much run after and admired, on whose pulpits you might justly write "*Mangling done here!*" and whose sermons, like Solomon's ships, contain not only gold and silver and ivory, but worthless apes and gaudy peacocks. In short, there are such complications of opinion in the present day that it baffles any attempt to classify all. For all this time, we must remember, there remains outside all

Schools of English Churchmen a large residuum of men who are ever proclaiming that they belong to "no party," and hold "no extreme views," not knowing in their Arcadian simplicity that they form about the most distinct party in the land! Never, I suppose, were there so many distinct schools and religious parties as there are in England at the present day. It need not surprise us; it is the natural consequence of increasing intellectual life and thought; men are awake and will think and act. It is not an unmixed evil; we provoke each other to emulation; we keep each other in order. We almost all agree in loyal love to the Church of England; the man who tries to destroy the Church, because we are divided, will find that he might as well interfere in the quarrels of husband and wife. We may scratch each other's faces, but we will not allow any one else to do it. One curious fact, however, remains to be mentioned. Of the three great parties in the Church, the most isolated and unpopular among the clergy is our own. Whenever a question has to be settled by voting, all Schools of thought combine in voting against the Evangelical.

But after all, when we balance party against party within our pale, and measure their comparative strength, what is the precise position which the old Evangelical School occupies in 1879 as compared with fifty years ago? Are we weaker or are we stronger? Is our influence in England increasing or diminishing? Do we hold our own, or, like the later Roman Empire, are our boundaries contracting every year? Is our strength, like that of Caleb, equal to anything or are we silently decaying and melting away? Is there any vigour left in our School, or are we, like extinct volcanoes, the cold memorials of a bygone power to shake the world? These are deeply interesting questions which ought to be looked in the face. I shall not shrink from looking at them and giving an answer.

Now, it is the fashion in many quarters just now to speak of the Evangelical School of Churchmen as an effete and worn-out body. It pleases some to proclaim everywhere that our day is past and our work done. We were once useful, like the old wooden three-deckers, but are now only fit to be laid up in ordinary or broken up. We are distanced in the Ecclesiastical race and left far in the rear. We shall soon be as useless as an old almanack or a stranded wreck on a

sandbank. Such is the talk of many. Mr. Gladstone once wrote in the *Contemporary* that Evangelical Churchmen are deficient in learning, and that their system "contains in itself the elements of disintegration." The organs of extreme ritualism declare that we are destitute of theological knowledge, and are rapidly falling to pieces. I believe some weak folk are frightened by all this "tall talk," and are preparing like rats, to quit the shinking ship, or, like rabbits, to bolt into their holes. For my own part, I regard it all as "talk," which there is nothing whatever to justify. The wish is father to the words of these men. I see facts, great patent facts, which lead me to a very different conclusion. No doubt the faults and infirmities of the Evangelical body are not few, and it does not need a Solomon to discern them. No doubt we are only a minority in the Church of England. We never were anything else, and probably never shall be. If we pleased men, and all spoke well of us, we should not be servants of Christ. We are completely outnumbered by all the other Schools of thought combined together. We are comparatively a little flock among the clergy, while "the Syrians fill the country." But if any man means to tell me that on striking the balance of parties and analysing the spiritual condition of each, he sees in the Evangelical party the signs of decay, I take leave to tell him that he is utterly and entirely mistaken. I will give him some plain facts to digest, and in the face of those facts I defy him to prove the truth of his assertion.

1. Does it look like decay when the Evangelical body occupies a commanding position, both in the pulpits of London and almost every other large town in England, which it certainly did not occupy fifty years ago ?

2. Does it look like decay when all over the land we possess the confidence of the majority of lay Churchmen—that is, of the middle classes and intelligent lower orders ? That we are in a minority among the clergy I fully admit, and probably in the ratio of four to one in the south of England. An Evangelical clergyman has very little chance of being elected a proctor in Canterbury Convocation. But I firmly believe a return from the laity, if it could be obtained, would tell a very different tale. When the Public Worship Bill was before the House of Commons, which is the true representative of the middle classes, Mr. Gladstone, with all his tail of

Ritualistic and Broad Church followers, never dared to go to a division. When Diocesan Conferences containing clergy and laity from all the parishes are brought together, and the churchwardens are fairly represented, you soon find that the speeches which elicit the most hearty response are those which are most thoroughly Protestant and Evangelical. When large masses of the population are brought together for religious objects in places like Manchester or Liverpool or Birmingham, you soon see that the good old principles of the Reformation—the principles of Cranmer, Ridley, and Latimer, and not of Laud—are the only principles they cheer and applaud. And does this look like decay or a dying cause? I think not.

3. Does it look like decay when our most distinctive doctrinal views and opinions can stand the test of sifting, searching, judicial inquiry, and can come out from such ordeal not merely unscathed and unharmed, but triumphant and victorious? Men used to say fifty years ago that Evangelical clergymen were little better than "tolerated heretics." They might be good earnest ministers, but they were not sound Churchmen. And too many of our party, I fear, with more meekness than book-knowledge, and more grace in their hearts than learning in their heads, used to hold their tongues, assume an apologetic attitude, and find nothing to answer. But since the Gorham case, and the Denison case, and the Mackonochie case, and the Purchas case, and the Bennett case, have been argued, and the arguments made public, I note that men have altered their tone a good deal, and changed their minds. Moreover, such books as Dean Goode's volumes on Scripture, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper, and Dr. Blakeney on the Prayer-book, and Canon Mozley on the Baptismal Controversy, have made their appearance and stand to this hour unanswered and unrefuted. In short, people have found out that Evangelical Churchmen are as loyal and true Churchmen as any in the land. We hold our ground at Church Congresses, and are recognized as an honest integral part of the Church of England which has a right to be heard anywhere. A Congress in which the Evangelical body was not represented would hardly be considered a Church Congress at all. We can set our foot down firmly, and speak with our enemies in the face, and defy any one to convince a jury that our distinctive

views are not the views of the Articles and Prayer-book, if fairly, honestly, and harmoniously interpreted. If any are "tolerated heretics" now-a-days, at any rate it is not the members of the Evangelical body. And does this look like decay? I think not.

4. Does it look like decay when every kind of Evangelical machinery has been borrowed from Evangelical Churchmen by clergy of other Schools, and adapted to their own purposes? They confess by their actions that they find no tools like ours and can invent no better. To hear some people talk, one might fancy there never was any hymn-book before *Ancient and Modern*, and never any Mission Weeks till the Ritualists began them! But this notion is ridiculously and entirely incorrect. I boldly assert, and I defy contradiction, that lively hymn singing, special Missions at home, non-Liturgical Services, Lay Agency, Mission Women, Pastoral Aid Societies, Missions to the Heathen, Missions to the Colonies, Missions to Seamen, Missions to our brethren on the Continent—all, all, all were first started by the Evangelical body. Other parties have had the wisdom to borrow our engines, but have too often not had the grace to acknowledge where they got them. But does it look like decay when the rival Schools of thought are continually coming to our arsenals, like Russians to Woolwich, and getting patterns to work by in their own way? I think not.

5. Does it look like decay when the religious societies, supported by Evangelical Churchmen, are continually growing in wealth, power, attractiveness, and influence? Let any intelligent Englishman quietly study the history of such institutions as the Church Missionary Society, the Jews' Society, the Pastoral Aid Society, the Colonial and Continental Church Society, the Irish Church Missionary Society, the Bible Society, and the London City Mission. Let him mark the constant increase of income which, comparing one decade of years with another since 1829, each of these great societies can report. Let him remember that each of these societies represents and expresses the voluntary confidence of that important body, the middle classes in England, and that this confidence is evidently increasing. And then let him note the huge fact that the 4,000 or 5,000 Evangelical congregations of the Church of

England raise more money by annual voluntary contributions for their own distinctive religious societies than is raised by all the non-Evangelical congregations put together! Does this look like a decaying School, a dying body, a worn-out party, a failing cause? I think not.

6. Does it look like decay when gatherings of Evangelical Churchmen are increasing and multiplying every year in numbers, size, and importance? Fifty years ago, the well-known Islington Meeting stood almost alone, and used to assemble with ease in the Vicar's library. I need hardly say no clergyman's library in London would hold it now. Within the last thirty years the annual meetings of the West of England lay and clerical, the Midland lay and clerical, the Northern Counties lay and clerical, the Home Counties lay and clerical, the Southport lay and clerical Societies—all based on Evangelical principles—have sprung into healthy existence and been most successful. And does this look like decay? I think not.

7. Finally, does it look like a failing cause and a decaying School of Theology when the very doctrines which are the glory of the Evangelical body, and which we are constantly accused of teaching too prominently and exclusively, are resorted to at last with avidity by members of other parties. Not a year passes over my head but I hear of such cases, and I have no doubt that my experience is that of many. I hear of people who have spent their lives and strength in the ranks of Ritualism and Broad Churchism eagerly grasping simple Evangelical truths in their last hours, and taking comfort in the very thing which they used to hold cheap and even despise. I hear of them, as they go down the valley of the shadow of death, casting aside all their old favourite tenets, and talking of nothing but the blood of Christ, the righteousness of Christ, the intercession of Christ, justification by faith, and all those precious corner-stones of our system which in former days they used to say we used to make too much of. On the other hand, I never heard of one single case of a truehearted Evangelical Churchman forsaking our principles in his last hour for Ritualism or Broad Churchism. Oh, no! The nearer men draw to the grave, the more they find out the value of simple Evangelical truth, without subtraction or addition, and the more determined they feel not to give it up. To use the words of William Romaine,

“The truths, which they held as doctrinal principles in life, they find comforting in death.” And does this look like decay? Does this look as if Evangelicalism were an effete and worn-out system? I think not.

In saying all this, I hope I shall not be mistaken. I abhor even the appearance of boasting. The defects and blemishes of our School of thought are so many that we have nothing to boast of, and much cause for humiliation. I could easily put my finger on not a few blots and blanks which require our serious attention. But I refrain, and leave this point for future consideration. I have said what I have to show my readers that a calm review of our position in 1879 affords strong reasons for thankfulness and encouragement. I have said it for the special benefit of my younger brethren in the ministry. I ask them not to be moved by the taunts and gibes of our rivals in other Schools, but to look at plain facts and see what a tale those facts tell. To appreciate facts and depreciate talk is one mark of a wise man. I ask them, in short, to believe that the Evangelical party, with all its faults, shows no symptoms of decay, and is as strong as any School of thought within the Church of England, if not stronger. We are not a sinking ship. We are not worn out yet. We are not dead, but alive. Yes! by the help of God we continue unto this day, and by the same help I believe we shall continue and hold our own for many a long day, in spite of ridicule, contempt, and persecution. “We shall live and not die,” as Wycliffe said to the Friars, and be a thorn in the side of the Pope and the infidel, and all their satellites and allies. We shall live and not die if we are only true to our old principles, if we will only work, and watch, and pray, and read, and understand the times.

But I repeat emphatically, we must be true to our old principles—the principles revived by Henry Venn, Romaine, Berridge, and Grimshawe, kept alive by Newton, Scott, Milner, and Cecil, handed down to us by Simeon, Daniel Wilson, Legh Richmond, and Bickersteth, kind and courteous to everybody, but stiff as steel in our adhesion to the old lines. We must steadily refuse to exalt things indifferent and secondary to the same level with the primary verities and weightier matters of the Gospel. We must beware of trimming, compromising, and conceding, under the vain hope of conciliating our rivals and catching them by guile,

or keeping our young people from adopting what we disapprove. It is wretched policy to try to out-manceuvre our opponents by borrowing their uniform and imitating their drill. It is a policy which gains over no enemy and disgusts many friends. Saul's armour will not fit David. It is useless to go down to Egypt for chariots and horses. We cannot do better than stick to our sling and stones—the Word of God and prayer. We cannot improve on our old principles ; then let us not lightly forsake them. We cannot make them popular ; they never were and never will be. Let us put up with unpopularity if conscience tells us that Christ and truth are on our side.

I am no prophet, and in a changing world I dare not conjecture where the Evangelical party will be when another fifty years have passed over the Church of England. The drying-up of the Turkish Empire, the prevalence of Popery, infidelity, lawlessness, are dark signs of the age. It may be that sifting, trying times are before us. It may be that our numbers may be thinned, and many may desert our cause under the pressure of incessant official frowns, persecution, ridicule, and unpopularity. But come what may, I trust the Evangelical cause will always have a representative body in the Church of England, and a faithful remnant who can stand fire, and stand alone. If gaps are made in our ranks, I hope the cry will always be, as it was in the squares at Waterloo, "Close up, men, close up ; let none give way." It was a grand saying of Lord Clyde on a memorable occasion, when some one talked of a battalion of the Guards retiring, "Sir, it would better that every man in Her Majesty's Guards should die where he stands, than that Her Majesty's Guards should turn their backs to the enemy." So say I this day to my Evangelical brethren, we have no cause for discouragement, despondency, or despair. Things are in a better condition in 1879 than they were in 1829. Then let us stand firm and fight on.