

ART. IV.—EVANGELICALISM IN THE PAST AND PRESENT.

Is the increase of Evangelical profession, as compared with its condition at the beginning of the century, due to a departure from its original principles, or to a progressive conviction of their truth ?

THE *fact* of such an increase is here assumed ; and indeed it cannot be doubted. We have but to read the biographies of good men, who lived at the close of the last century, and at the opening of the present, to be convinced of this. At that time, Evangelical Preachers, at least in our Church, were marked men ; they were regarded with suspicion, as men of extreme opinions, enthusiastic and dangerous. Even in the memory of those among us who can look back through thirty or forty years of adult life, a great change has taken place. No longer ago than that, in London, in our other great cities, and in country districts also, an Evangelical Ministry was comparatively rare. In many a neighbourhood one had to go far to find it.

There is a necessary relation between Ministry and general profession. That which was true of the Ministry, was true also of the general religious profession. There were then many serious and conscientious people, but comparatively few who held clear Evangelical truth. Eighty years ago, such families in a neighbourhood were *marked* families. They were considered extreme, strange, holders of "peculiar opinions."

All know how different things are now. An Evangelical Ministry is not rare either in town or country. And even those who do not agree with them cannot now call Evangelical people *peculiar*, because they are no longer uncommon. In most neighbourhoods, it is true, they are still in the minority ; but in some, as far as regards the upper and middle classes, they form an absolute majority. I am speaking of profession only ; not of reality.

How has this change arisen ? To what source is it to be traced ?

According to the terms of the subject, the inquiry is narrowed to two alternatives—a departure from original principles, on the one hand ; on the other, a progressive conviction of their truth. But another element must, I think, be taken into consideration—the general awakening of attention to the subject of religion, the greatly increased interest in it as a whole. If we may judge by such scraps of information as have come down to us, religion

was rarely mentioned in polite society eighty or a hundred years ago. If my memory serves me aright, Miss Burney makes one of her characters in "Evelina" say of another that "she was vastly too well-bred to mention such a subject in good society."

Such is not the opinion now. In our day, religious practices and ritual, religious questions, and, with more or less of depth and earnestness, even the doctrines of religion, are everywhere talked of and written about. Every secular magazine has its religious article, newspapers discuss the religious questions of the day, and many novels give religion its place in their pages. In society, among the upper and middle classes, the favourite church, and the mode of worship preferred, are standing subjects of conversation; and this, with the young, as well as with their elders. Minds are at work, taste is exercised, feelings and preferences are engaged, on a subject once quite outside the range of general interest.

The change is great. But it is a change by no means all for good. In many persons, it is but a transition from one *fancy* to another, from this to that form of mere worldliness, from indifference to a misguided zeal, from *no* opinion to a *wrong* opinion. Yet movement is better than stagnation. And certainly, in this general movement, Evangelical religion has had its full share of profit. Other forms of activity have shown themselves, some old and some new; but *this* form has appeared in full proportion, both in the Ministry and in religious profession.

Viewing the question therefore in this light, I should reply that the increase spoken of is due to a progressive conviction of the truth of Evangelical principles. Amid the movement, or even ferment, of minds, God's Holy Spirit has wrought; and hence Scriptural teaching has revived, a cold and sapless morality has in numberless cases been replaced by a setting forth of the doctrines of grace, many hearts have truly received those doctrines, many families have been trained in Evangelical principles and practice, and the truth has gained ground by its own inherent power, which is the power of God, the effect of His Spirit. There was *no* departure from original principles, no lowering of the standard. Christ, lifted up, drew men unto Him.

But other questions arise. In the course of the eighty years that have passed since the beginning of the century, has any further change taken place? Has that increased Evangelical preaching and profession maintained its standard? Is the tone of ministry as clear, deep, decided and spiritual at the present time as it was when Evangelical Ministers were few? Does such preaching and such profession spread now? And if so, without lowering or dilution? Have we any reason to judge that what has increased in quantity has deteriorated in quality?

"A departure from its original principles," is a strong expression. There has been *no* definite giving up of principle, no marked or deliberate going back. In the main, the same Evangelical doctrines are preached, the same Evangelical profession is made. Further, in the ministry, considered as a whole, there is not less but more of power. The many, taken collectively, are not less weighty and powerful than were the few. Far from it. Nay, when we now read the Evangelical sermons of the past generation, do they not, in some cases, seem to us elementary and even commonplace? Let that impression however be corrected by the thought that doctrines with which we have long been familiar were then but newly revived, and that what may seem to us commonplace had then a freshness and originality of its own. But though *collectively* the Evangelical Ministry has gained in power rather than lost, can the same be said of it *individually*? I fear not. Each preacher among the many is not, I fear, such as was each one among the few.

An illustration may make my meaning clearer. The river *Durance*, in part of its course, runs in a deep and narrow channel; but at certain seasons the stream spreads itself over a level, pebbly bed, ten times the width of the channel, and then forms an imposing river, flowing between banks far distant from each other, but, except where the deep channel is, very shallow. In this case, there is no *loss* of volume of water; on the contrary, there is a clear gain; for the deep stream still runs, and its channel is even enlarged by degrees through these frequent overflows; but the increase is not all that it looks, for on each side is a shallow margin, much wider than the channel itself.

This illustration may serve to show the present condition, not only of the Evangelical Ministry, but also of Evangelical profession. There are as many true, decided, spiritual Christians as before; probably more; for the deep stream still flows, and is itself, it may be hoped, both deeper and wider than it was; but not in proportion to its *seeming* increase. Here, too, there is on each side a wide and shallow margin.

There are several circumstances which account for this.

Many persons are now *hereditary* professors of Evangelical principles. A generation or two has passed since first the father or grandfather of the present race was truly taught by the Spirit. In some such families, not by inheritance, for that cannot be, but by a direct blessing on Evangelical teaching and example, the like spiritual life shows itself as of old, and an honoured name is borne by no unworthy successors. But in others little but the profession remains: the tone is lowered, the light is dimmed, the life seems all but extinct.

Again, it is easier now to make a profession of Evangelical religion. The "finger of scorn" is almost a bygone thing.

There is now but little reproach attaching to serious religion, though some doubtless there will always be.

On the whole, therefore, a qualified answer must, I think, be returned to the question proposed. Amid the newly awakened attention to religion, we may thankfully recognise a real spread of Evangelical truth: yet, at the same time, we cannot shut our eyes to a partial lowering of its tone; in actual fact, in some measure; yet more, as a possible danger.

There are, among others, two things which mainly affect the condition and spread of Evangelical religion; *Ministry* and *family life*.

(1) I feel a delicacy when, a Minister myself, I touch on the details of the Ministry, lest I should seem to take on myself the office of a teacher of my brethren. I ask their forbearance. I ask them to believe that I speak humbly and respectfully. Yet, inasmuch as the Ministry has a most important bearing on the general tone of religion, and as a low-toned ministry will have a lowering influence, and, through grace, a high-toned Ministry the reverse, I venture to speak my mind.

The few Evangelical Ministers of the old times were both *students* and *preachers*. To use an old phrase, they were "*painful ministers of the Word of God*," readers and thinkers, men of study as well as of action, men of prayer and meditation, men who made much of preaching the Word. The present busy employment about a multiplicity of lesser things has, I fear, brought a change. Ministers are as diligent as ever, but not about the same things. Their activity spends itself too much on details, on machinery, on secularities. The Ministry suffers greatly from this cause; suffers especially in its most important part, the preaching of the Word. There is, in much of the preaching of our day, a want of depth and fulness and freshness. Hence, souls are unfed, and a reproach is brought on the very ordinance of preaching.

The fault lies by no means wholly with the clergy themselves. In many busy parishes, there is a great want of lay help in lay work, and chairmanships and treasurerships, and account-keeping, and things of less importance still—things not really forming part of ministerial work—occupy much precious time; time which ought to be given to study and to pastoral work.

Let me touch on another point. The taste of the day is for a showy ritual; and in many Evangelical Churches this taste is indulged to a considerable extent. An incongruous approach is made, in ritual, to those with whose principles no sympathy is felt. The difference that is perceived in the pulpit is hardly to be noticed in the rest of the service. Will not even that difference become merged in the general likeness? Is there not a

necessary connection between ritual and preaching? Will not the ministry of the Word suffer?

The plea put forward is that the service in Evangelical Churches must be made as attractive as that in other churches, or Evangelical Preaching will not be heard. The object, therefore, is to draw, to please, to retain—especially the young.

Though myself a lover of music, especially sacred music, and though delighting in beauty, both in nature and in art, I yet venture on a word of warning. Not such were the means used by our fathers—by Romaine and Berridge, by Venn and Scott and Newton, by Cecil and Robinson and Simeon. To gratify is not to save; to draw to the church is not to win to Christ; to minister to the taste is not to build up in the faith. If *such* be not still the aim—to win, to save, to edify—then indeed there is a departure from the Evangelical principles of our fathers; nay, I would add, if *such* be not the aim, not merely indirectly by *such* means as I have mentioned, but directly, by God's own appointed means, the preaching of the Word blest by the Spirit.

I would not keep behind the age. I would even press into the service of Evangelical religion that improvement in music, and that great revival of architectural taste, which none can deny to have occurred. But I would keep these things strictly in their proper place. I would use them as handmaids, but by no means let them become rulers or tyrants.

As an instance, I should be very sorry to restore such music and singing as the elder among us can remember in some of the country churches of our youth. Nor would I restore, or even willingly retain, the unsightly "three-decker." And yet I would speak tenderly of that ancient structure, still surviving, as it does, in many a church. I cannot forget the broadsides that have been poured from many such into the lines of the enemy of souls. I cannot forget the good service they have done in their day. I cannot forget that the pulpits of St. Ann's, Blackfriars, and Huddersfield, and Yelling, and St. Mary Woolnoth, and St. John's, Bedford Row, were of this pattern. I cannot admire, yet I must still regard with a loving interest.

There were other "three-deckers" in those days: and they too have been changed for a newer fashion. The "wooden walls of Old England" are now almost a thing of the past; the ironclad has taken their place. In this instance, the change has been from beauty to ugliness; in the other, it has been, I freely admit, from ugliness to beauty. But our ironclads are manned by English sailors of the same stamp as manned the old *Swiftsure*, and *Agamemnon*, and *Victory*; and their thunder is yet louder, and their broadsides more effective. Let us look to it that the parallel hold good throughout; that our modern pulpits be as

well manned as the old ; that the Gospel message be as full and clear ; and that, through grace, the effect be not less.

A heavy responsibility rests on Evangelical Ministers. The maintenance of Evangelical principles in their clearness and strength depends in great measure upon *them* ; upon their clear, firm, thoughtful, and spiritual preaching, and their consistent and unworldly living.

But (2) this responsibility rests on others besides Ministers. The heads of families have a large share of it. And in no respect more than as regards *separation from the world*.

There is no doubt that this separation is less marked than formerly. In a measure it must be so through the mere increase in number. If the world has become, in outward things, less unlike religion, religious people are necessarily less strange, and the difference is less strongly marked. The danger is, lest the effect should be produced by religion becoming worldly, rather than by the world becoming religious.

It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to lay down definite rules on such subjects as amusements, family habits, and conformity with those around us. On many points of this kind opinion will differ even in those who agree in principle. Only let it be borne in mind by all, that undue compliance quickly lowers the spiritual tone ; and that, in many families, the cause of the low spiritual tone of one generation, as compared with a former, is not far to seek : the world has crept in.

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ART. V.—CAMBRIDGE A HUNDRED YEARS AGO.

THE state of religion in this country, and particularly with respect to the Church of England, a hundred years ago, has been described in several ways, by Messrs. Abbey and Overton in their recently published volumes, "The English Church in the Eighteenth Century," an ably written work and full of information (Longmans, Green & Co.). Mr. Ryle's interesting work "The Christian Leaders of the Last Century," well-known, no doubt, to many of our readers, also contains some striking notes, social, ecclesiastical, and religious. Another work, published some thirty years ago, the late Mr. Gunning's "Reminiscences" of Cambridge,¹ a book which is, probably, almost unknown outside a certain circle, gives a good deal of curious in-

¹ Reminiscences of the University, Town, and County of Cambridge, from the year 1780. By the late H. Gunning, M.A., Senior Esquire Bidell. Second Edition. Geo. Bell. 1855.