

## Lecture 2 - Evangelicalism in the late Victorian period circa 1860...

The first decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century benefited greatly from the ongoing effects of the 18<sup>th</sup> century revival. The direct descendants of Wesley and Whitfield formed the largest group outside the establishment amongst the Free Churches. The same evangelical spirit touched every denomination besides the Methodist. Anglicans, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Baptists and even Quakers were warmed by its fire.

The Evangelical Anglicans at that time had a firm footing in the growing towns of the Midlands and the North. It produced men such as Hugh McNeil in Liverpool, J.C Miller in Birmingham, Hugh Stowell in Salford, Atkinson in Leeds, and the Robinsons in Leicester. Leading evangelical Anglican bishops at that time would also have included Pelham of Norwich, Waldegrave of Carlisle, Baring of Durham and later J.C. Ryle of Liverpool.

One can picture pious Anglican homes nourished on the devotional piety of *Thomas Scott's Bible Commentary*, a work began in the previous century and published in weekly numbers well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century. One said this work was to nurture, teach and encourage pious souls through the decades, and must have been a great secret source of our national strength.

Amongst the Nonconformists there was considerable growth in the first quarter of the century up until about the mid-1840s. There were many local revivals taking place up and down the country throughout this period. There was a slowing down in the early 1850s but this was reversed by the famous 1859 Revival. As is well known in 1851 census was taken in England and Wales of those who attended church or chapel. This census revealed that about a half of the population attended services regularly, and these numbers were more or less equally divided between Anglican and Nonconformists. It would have been interesting if a similar census had been taken in 1861, following the great revival, clearly the numbers attending would have been greatly increased. For figures see, *The Second Evangelical Awakening in Britain*. J. Edwin Orr, pp.270... Baptists increased in the region of 75 ½ thousand between 1859 and 1865. Estimated at the same period Congregationalists increased their membership by 90,000, Primitive Methodist just over 50,000, smaller Methodist groups, ie. New Connexion, United Free, and Bible Christians 194,000. In Wales and in Scotland estimated that 1/10th of the entire population were converted. Baptist Nowell believed that something in the region of 100,000 people were converted in Ulster.

We have little time to give any more information in regard to the state of the churches in the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as in every age the churches had their problems and difficulties, but on the whole the assessment given by Dr John

Campbell, pastor of Whitfield Tabernacle, London is a very good and reliable assessment of the spiritual conditions amongst nonconformity of that time. He wrote:

*“We hesitate not to assert that at no period of our country’s history was the Dissenting pulpit ever more thoroughly, more unequivocally evangelical than at the present hour.”*

Contending for the Faith David G. Fountain p. 29.

Let me also include this account from Robert Ensor’s Oxford History of England. Ensor was an Edwardian rationalistic historian, he describes Evangelical life in England in the 1870s and 1880s. Though we are going to be looking in a moment how hostile forces against the Gospel began to make their presence felt in the latter part of the century nevertheless much that was good continued into this period, and in fact it is true that Nonconformist church growth continued to make progress right into the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Ensor wrote:

*“Evangelicals spent a remarkable amount of time on organised prayer, praise, and preaching. The pulpit dominated. In typical English villages in the 1870s and 80s practically all the inhabitants above infancy attended either church or chapel every Sunday, many of them twice or even three times. The children also went twice to Sunday School. Apart from cases of necessity, the only exceptions to this universal worship would be, here and there, a few known village ne’er-do-wells. In addition, the chapels held prayer meetings during the week, and the church often a regular weeknight service – both numerous attended. In the towns of moderate size there was almost as much strictness, ..... The observance of Sunday was almost a religion in itself. No games of any kind were ever played on it; no field sports indulged in; no entertainments given, publicly or privately. Novels were banned; the Bible or serious, preferably religious works were appropriate reading for Sunday. Thus sermons had large sales, and so did “magazines for Sunday reading”. The habit of setting apart one rest day in the week for religion and serious thinking deepened the character of the nation. And some high peaks of literature – Bible, Paradise Lost, Pilgrims Progress, for instance – became extremely familiar to very wide classes who today would never read anything on that level.*

He also describes a Sunday in 1868 at the home of Lord Northbrook later to become Viceroy of India where he describes the family worship that took place in that house at 9 am. every day.

England 1870 – 1914 R.K. C. Ensor p. 140.

Another secular historian Keith Feiling called the Victorian age a “Golden Age”, and added that the British were more religious at this stage than in any period since the Commonwealth of Oliver Cromwell.

See also, Modern Britain Life and Work through Two Centuries of Change. T.K. Derry and T.L. Jarman pp. 190, 191.

We can also add some note on the social impact of this tremendous Evangelical influence on Victorian society. British rates of recorded crime fell as markedly in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as they have risen since. The overall incidence of serious offences recorded by the police in the 1890s was only about 60% of what had been recorded in the 1850s and, given that the efficiency of the reporting and recording of crime was improving at the time, the real fall in crime rate was probably far greater than that indicated by official statistics. Thus in 1900, Britain was not only a less violent and dishonest country than today, but also less violent and dishonest than it had been in the earlier part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In 1888, about three out of every four children in England and Wales attended Sunday School. There was a clear link between the rise in Sunday School attendance and the fall in crime rate.

David Bebbington very graphically describes the century as follows:

*The hundred years or so before the First World War deserve to be called the Evangelical century. In that period the activism of the movement enabled it to permeate British society. Righteousness, as Evangelicals might have put it, abounded in the land. Major inroads were made on the existing mass of religious indifference. Less impact was made on the lower working class than on higher social groups, but it is quite mistaken to hold that the working class as a whole were largely untouched by the Gospel. Manners and politics were transformed; even intellectual life was affected far more than is normally admitted. If hypocrisy is the tribute vice pays to virtue, then the undoubted existence of hypocrisy is a sign of the Evangelical achievement in setting new standards of behaviour. Historians have sometimes been misled into minimising the role of popular Protestantism by the omnipresence of an Evangelical atmosphere. The Gospel conditioned unspoken assumptions. Historians have been deceived by contemporary comments lamenting the scarcity of godliness. Shaftesbury's writings are full of them. Apart from Shaftesbury's dyspeptic temperament, the phenomena can be explained by the scale of Evangelical ambitions. Nothing short of a nation united in the fear of the Lord was their aim.*

Evangelicalism in Modern Britain p. 149.

The same aim was undoubtedly that sought by the Puritans in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. *Give me the childlike prating love that longs to build thy house again.*

.....  
.....

**Much more could be said about the glories of the triumphs of Evangelicalism in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century particularly the early part, but as E.J. Poole –Connor perceptively observed in his Evangelicalism in England.**

*"The history of religion in England during the 19<sup>th</sup> century was, from the Evangelical standpoint, one of bright hope and ultimate disappointment. The flood-tide was followed by a rapidly running ebb."*

Evangelicalism in England. EJ Poole–Connor p. 201.

As the century unfolds we begin to see the hostile elements which steadily gaining ground that were destined to sap the strength of Evangelicalism in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as we have seen also happened at the end of the Puritan era in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

---

**We now need to try and identify some of these elements of hostility. The influence of antagonistic literary figures.**

**1. The Influence of Popular Literary figures.**

E.J. Poole Connor draws our attention to a not insignificant number of influential literary figures who showed a marked hostility towards evangelical truth. As today there is a question as to whether these individuals were influencing public perceptions, or whether or not they were simply reflecting a rising hostility in some quarters of society towards Christianity.

Amongst these figures were novelists, well-known names such as Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy etc. whose writings reflected a level of regard to righteousness and religion, but who nevertheless held Evangelical religion in no small degree of contempt. Another, the historian and essayist, Thomas Babington Macaulay for all his admiration of the Puritans, nevertheless expressed his dislike of what he called, "**The bray of Exeter Hall.**" Thomas Carlyle one of the literary giants of the age made little or any profession of religion and it is very hard to tell what he believed at heart, and though he gave us the priceless treasures Cromwell's Letters and Speeches and a wonderful translation of Luther's great hymn, "*A safe stronghold our God is still*, Thomas Carlyle was no great friend or advocate of Evangelical religion. Jane Welch Carlyle/ Thomas Carlyle's wife and George Eliot were definitely agnostic or even atheistic in their thinking.

Pool- Connor comments,

*"Into a soil, so largely prepared to receive it by the presence of these humanistic, agnostic, and secularists influences, there fell a seed of thought, basically simple, yet capable of the most complex development, and proving ultimately to be one of the most revolutionary of modern times. It was the idea of the inevitability of progress; known in its more systematised forms as the doctrine of Evolution. It's rise in this country was apparently due to nothing loftier than the growth of national well-being, much of which was the outcome of Revival influences. The idea of progress, seized the popular mind. It was translated into a kind of universal law. An immense impetus was given to the popular trend by the publication of Charles Darwin's Origin of Species and The Descent of Man. His theories exactly suited the public palate. In many circles belief in biological evolution became the hallmark of intellectual smartness. Particularly was it seized upon by those who were atheistically inclined. A universe which came into existence by gradual unfolding of its own innate forces – how simple and majestic a conception! And how triumphantly it did away with any necessity for a Creator!"*

**What we start to see quietly developing in the 19<sup>th</sup> century is the re-emergence of man's self-confidence. Just as in the 17<sup>th</sup> century man's increasing growth in knowledge and understanding of the physical universe bolstered this self-confidence.**

Alongside this, and accompanying this movement was the development of the scientific method. The scientific method was really a product of the Renaissance and clearly affected, the thinking of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, as we have seen, and was gave rise in that century to the strong emphasis upon rationalistic thought. The determination of facts by observation and measurement and the casting off of anything that could not be explained by the faculty of human reason. In the later 19<sup>th</sup> century as in the later 17<sup>th</sup> century man's reason started once again to become the measure of all things. A belief that the scientists had the answer to all things that really mattered to the well-being and happiness of mankind. Once again many became self-confident to the point of believing that man by his own endeavours, unassisted by any Divine Power, could solve his own problems and make himself a master of his own environment and destiny.

As Latourette observed:

*Many came to feel that science and religion were incompatible. Historically, the scientific approach had only been made possible by a trust in the orderliness and dependability of the universe which was an outgrowth of the Christian faith. Now it looked as though the child had found the parent unnecessary and even a hindrance.*

*Many seemed unable to discover the God of the Bible by the process which science advocated. Indeed, science appeared to leave no room for God or at most to make possible only an uncertain belief in a being whom men with all their searching could never unveil.*

History of the Expansion of Christianity vol 4. K.S. Latourette p.16.

As in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century period we looked at yesterday, men had become prisoners to the power of their own reasoning capacity. The concept of Revelation was once again lost by those who followed this pathway.

---

**We need also at this point to note the influence of what came to be called the Higher Criticism, we will do this but we will keep in mind perhaps a more important question and that we will seek to deal with the moment, that is how these hostile forces began to find their way and find acceptability even within the larger Orthodox Evangelical denominations of the time.**

The impact of Higher Criticism. One of the early proponents in England of this was Benjamin Jowett of Oxford. He wrote that "Scripture demanded to be interpreted by the same rules of evidence and the same criteria of criticism must be applied to it as

to any other literature." He argued that it was wrong to presuppose that the Scriptures constituted one harmonious whole, and that they were inspired by the Holy Spirit. (Worship and Theology in England p.182). In 1858 Buckle in his *History of Civilisation* had already applied the critical or historical method to the records of Christianity. He again argued that these histories should be interpreted without the preconceived idea that there was any Divine purpose running through them, let alone any sense of divine judgement in them. (ibid p. 181).

Higher Criticism in simple terms is the study of the Bible starting off from the premise that it is no different to any other book. That though it may have great excellence and be a great masterpiece, nevertheless in the way that we interpret it same principles need to be applied as we would any other great work of literature.

This so-called scientific method of studying the Bible, requires us to begin with no preconceptions, the main one being that we must look at this book as if there were no God. The standard by which the book is to be assessed and interpreted is from the scientific principle, not that it is God's Word but that it is like any other book. This starting point obviously drastically affects our whole understanding and attitude to the Book. (Historical Criticism, Eta Linneman p.84).

This so-called higher critical method of studying the Bible, was first proposed by two Continental scholars in the 18<sup>th</sup>-century, the first Astruc a Frenchman in 1753, and later Eichhorn a German in 1787. Eichhorn taught his students at Gottingen University that the miraculous element in the Israelitish records was due to oriental habits of thought, which "seizes upon the ultimate results, and ignores the intermediary processes."

Julius Wellhausen (1844 - 1918) is often regarded as the main advocate of these ideas, though he was simply popularising the ideas that a number of individuals had set out earlier in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. His theory is often referred to as the Graf-Wellhausen theory acknowledging his debt to one of his predecessors, Ritschl Graf.

These individuals still claimed to believe in God but at the same time place such emphasis on the importance of rationalistic thought and the pre-eminence of man that they could not tolerate a view of history that placed God in sovereign control, and that allowed for his guidance and intervention in the affairs of men. Behind their thinking was the false belief that the idea of religion had gradually evolved and developed in man's mind. Wellhausen did not believe in the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, but rather that it was written by many different authors, and that much of it was primitive and mythical and that it had been all put together edited and modified by one or more editors at some much later date. The same sort of principles he applied the rest of the Old Testament. He has been described as the Darwin of Biblical studies.

E.J. Poole - Connor helpfully quotes A.C. Underwood, in his *History of the Baptists*, in relation to the effects of higher criticism.

*“The idea of evolution was the principal, though not the sole, agent in bringing about the abandonment of the assumptions of the older theology. Biblical criticism was largely the application of the evolutionary hypotheses to the sacred writings. It created a new historical sense – perhaps the most original and distinctive feature of the 19<sup>th</sup> century mentality.”*

In Britain these views were further developed and popularised by William Robertson Smith (1846 – 1894). Astonishingly a professor at the Free Church College Aberdeen.

He argued that no ancient book has come down to us really intact. He spoke of them being disfigured by editors, who mixed up foreign matter with the original text. He spoke of the original titles of books being lost and the author becoming unknown or their work attributed to the wrong author. He spoke of the purpose of books becoming obscured with the lapse of centuries and leading to false interpretations. He spoke of some of these books being forgeries or apocryphal books. He said that those who study such books should be skilled in purging out interpolations, exposing forgeries and manifesting the truth and finding the genuinely article amidst all the accretions. The astonishing thing was that he began to apply these kind of methods to the Bible itself.

He also held the evolutionary theory of religion. He was wedded to the notion of religion as a steadily advancing developmental process. It is also said that William Robertson Smith’s ideas had some formative influence on the thinking of Sigmund Freud.

What is also astonishing is that at first William Robertson Smith was allowed to keep his position as a professor in the Free Church of Scotland College in Aberdeen, and many who called themselves evangelicals supported him, arguably on the principle of freedom of conscience in matters of religion. It was only sometime later and after the publication in 1881 of his book, *“The Old Testament in the Jewish church*, that he was dismissed by the Free Church of Scotland and took up a professorship in the University of Cambridge.

Another sad and perhaps more significant observation on this is that evangelicals in some instances, instead of resisting this movement and exposing what it was, tried to accommodate their views to it. Even men whom we might regard with some respect like R.W. Dale, whose work on the Atonement is a 19<sup>th</sup> century classic, nevertheless could make plausible and beguiling statements such as:

*“They say.... The story in Genesis of the creation of Adam and Eve and the Fall of man is a myth..... Well if poems and parables are vehicles of Divine revelation, I cannot see any reason why this should not be.... Many attempts have been made to reconcile science in Genesis. The straight answer is that the first chapter of the Bible is not an account, and was not intended to be an account, of the physical phenomena of creation. You do not try to reconcile David’s Psalms with natural science, and the same law is to be applied to the first page of Holy Scripture concerning the origin of the material universe.*

Quoted by EJ Poole, *Evangelicalism in England* p. 234.

Even a man like Joseph Parker,( though he also went on to oppose Spurgeon in the Downgrade Controversy) but whom we could not readily accuse of denying the basic doctrines of the Christian faith, such as the Deity of Christ, the Virgin Birth, the Vicarious nature of the Atonement, or future punishment of sin. Whose commentaries can be read with profit by any preacher, nevertheless surprises us in his book *Ecce Deus* (Behold God) when he hints that the direct teaching of the Holy Spirit, may in time enable the Christian to be less dependent on the Book and more dependent on the Spirit. (See Poole-Connor p.234).

What we see is the same practice of accommodation to the spirit of the age that we saw when we looked at the period 1660 and up until the time of the 18<sup>th</sup> century revival.

.....  
.....

**Another characteristic of this period of course was the influence of the Romantic movement, which tended in Christian circles to lead to an indistinctness in regard to doctrinally teaching.**

In 1856 a Congregationalist minister Thomas Toke Lynch published a collection of hymns entitled *The Rivulet* . This book was severely criticised much to the fore in this was John Campbell the editor of two religious publications *The Banner* and *The Record*. The criticism was that to quote, “*There was not one particle vital religion or Evangelical piety in the book, that nearly the whole of his hymns might have been written by a Deist., And a very large portion might be sung by a congregation of freethinkers.*

John Campbell laid it down as a principle that sound doctrine should be plainly stated in every hymn. Another criticism of Lynch’s hymnbook is to be found in an article on Lynch in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, this article stated that the hymns in the *Rivulet* expressed a too exclusive admiration of nature to be suitable for Christian worship. **The watering down of hymnody today.**

This hymnbook was defended by Dr. Samuel Cox who later went on to deny the doctrine of everlasting punishment, but surprisingly it was also supported by Thomas Binney the Evangelical who gave us the hymn, *Eternal light, Eternal light how pure the soul must be...*

This later period of the 19<sup>th</sup> century seems to have been marked by an ever increasing tendency in the churches to abandon doctrinally precision, as expressed in the great confessions and formularies of the church. **Trend to neglect theological precision.**

We have already noticed that there was an aversion among some of the descendants of the Puritans to formulate their beliefs in creeds or in too tightly drawn up articles of faith.

E.J. Poole, in his *The Apostasy of English Nonconformity* perceptively commented.

*Many of the earlier Independents who affirmed most strongly their Puritan creed were careful to state that they did not regard it as final – although with some inconsistency they often vigorously controverted opposing views – and their representatives at the Westminster Assembly “while not refusing to unite with their brethren in the Confession of Faith, disputed the right of that or any other assembly to confess its faith for posterity, or make that confession binding on them.”*

*Nor was the ideal which led them to this position other than a lofty one. The thought that the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church was so real as to render creeds and canons alike unnecessary, and that God had continually “more light and truth to break forth from his Word,” has possessed for many good men an irresistible fascination.*

*In his, *Autobiography of a Preacher*, Dr Joseph Parker relates that at one of the meetings of the Congregational Union, at which the proposal was made that some more definite statement of doctrinal belief should be drawn up, one of the speakers used the metaphor that a few signposts were a great advantage when there was a fog about, to which Dr Baldwin Brown, (an avowed liberal), in opposing the proposal, replied, “What need had they of signposts when they enjoyed the presence of the Living Guide?”*

*This reply Dr Parker regarded as being the finest and most convincing that any man could have made.*

*But, lofty and spiritual as this conception undoubtedly was, it contained an element of the gravest danger. When any body of men lays such fervent stress upon the declaration that neither “Fathers nor councils, canons nor creeds” possess any authority over their faith; when they “resolved to interpret Scripture, not according to any one scheme or system, but as loyalty to the light of truth and the spirit of Christianity may dictate”; their position is not greatly removed from that of those who regard Christian doctrine, not as “the truth once for all delivered to the saints”, but as a body of tentative conclusions which, like the deductions of scientists, are liable to frequent correction or even, in process of time, to complete reversal; and they may easily come, not only to proclaim as divine truth that which in a former generation they denounced as soul destroying error, but also to subject their views concerning the Scripture itself – hitherto the authoritative arbiter of their theology – to the same drastic revision.*

*The Apostasy of English Nonconformity pp. 16 – 17.*

So much so did the spirit prevail that in 1877 R.W. Dale (quoted a few moments ago negatively, but in this case we can agree with him) commented in the “*Congregationalist Magazine*.”

*“We have no theological system in the sense that Calvinism was the theological system of the Puritans of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. It may be doubted whether for a long time to come any*

*such system is likely to be constructed that will secure the universal adhesion of Congregationalists. What may be described as a Congregational theological tradition has been broken. We no longer have theological life."*

A Miscellany of British Church History p.499.

.....  
.....

**Mention needs to be made of the infamous publication entitled, *Essays and Reviews* 1860.**

See description in, *The Victorian Church* Chadwick pp 75-78.

In the middle of the 1850s, two prominent Anglican clergyman, Jowett of Balliol College, Oxford, mentioned above, and Frederick Temple, agreed to gather together a body of writers who would publish a volume to encourage what they called free and honest discussions in regard to the question of biblical inerrancy. Seven writers contributed to this volume. They were castigated by the orthodox as "*The seven extinguishers of the seven lamps of the Apocalypse.*" (*Worship and Theology in England* p. 181).

The overall theme of the book was that:

Christian theology unless it is adapted to the new knowledge would become synonymous with ignorance. They were saying that unless Orthodoxy adapts itself to so-called modern knowledge orthodoxy and ignorance will be regarded as the same thing.

It was an attempt to reconcile Christianity with the outlook of the modern mind. One of the contributors, H.B. Wilson tried to argue That the Sixth Article of the famous *Thirty- Nine Articles* of the Church of England, "*Contains no declaration of the Bible being throughout supernaturally suggested... Nor the slightest attempt at defining inspiration.*"

To the credit of many incumbents in the Church of England at that time the book was widely condemned. 11,000 Anglican incumbents declared their belief in the inspiration of the Scriptures and the eternity of punishment and the book was at length synodically condemn in 1864. (*The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* p.471).

.....

**Another book published by liberals later in the century was *Lux Mundi*, 1889.**

*Lux Mundi (The Light of the World)* was compiled 1889 by a group of Oxford Anglican teachers under the editorship of Charles Gore, then the principal of Pusey House. This was an attempt to re-translate Christian doctrine in the light of what was described as modern intellectual and moral problems. In it Charles Gore argued that God could only become a man in Jesus Christ by accepting the limitations of the first century world view, and that this was part of the great paradox of the self – emptying of grace (kenosis theory). This led him to conclude that our Lord’s treating as historical events, references to such Old Testament passages as Jonah and the whale, could be dismissed as evidence of their historical reality, as our Lord’s understanding was limited by the understanding of his age. The contributors to this book again argued that they wanted the Church to enter into the appreciation of the new social and intellectual movements of the age and give a place to all new knowledge.

This book was opposed by the older school of High Churchmen like Henry Parry Liddon Dean of St Paul’s Cathedral. (Oxford Dictionary).

It was also opposed by evangelicals like J.C. Ryle of Liverpool is also by Ellicott of Gloucester and Bristol, and Hervey of Bath and Wells.

Many nonconformists were also influenced by these views, and it is in this context now we begin to see the issues raised in what came to be called the Downgrade Controversy.

.....

### The Downgrade Controversy.

The term seems to have emerged after C.H. Spurgeon published an article in 1887 lamenting evil days and downgrading tendencies, and also criticising ministers of the various denominations who questioned the cardinal doctrines of the faith. Spurgeon eventually left the Baptist Union and the London Baptist Association as a result of their failure to disassociate themselves from, and condemn such tendencies. Whilst many Baptist ministers remained within the Union, Spurgeon’s actions made an impact among evangelical ministers of all denominations, and many wrote to him to thank him for his fearless stand. It was nonetheless a bitter struggle and it is said, and surely said rightly to have hastened his death in 1892.

(See the Concise Dictionary of Christian Tradition p 131)

*It is a great grief to me that hitherto many of our most honoured friends in the Baptist Union, with strong determination, close their eyes to serious divergences from truth. I doubt not but their motive has been in a measure laudable, for they desire to preserve peace, and hoped that errors, which they were forced to see, would be removed as their friends advanced in years and knowledge.*

*But at last even these will, I trust, discover that the new views are not the old truth in a better dress, but deadly errors with which we can have no fellowship. I regard full-grown "modern thought" as a totally new cult, having no more relation to Christianity than the mist of the evening to the everlasting hills.*

C.H. Spurgeon November 23, 1887 quoted in the Forgotten Spurgeon Ian Murray p. 152

*It seems to me truth is built upon the one hand by orthodox preaching, and pulled down, on the other, by practical compromise.*

F. C. Spurr quoted by David Fountain p. 115

.....

### **The Drift into the Social Gospel.**

The philosophy of rationalism or naturalism as it came to be called in the 19<sup>th</sup> century took the position again, as we have already seen at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century that reality can only be explained in purely natural categories without any appeal to the supernatural. Nineteenth Century liberalism was a wholesale attack on all things supernatural within historic, orthodox, biblical Christianity. The principal targets of 19<sup>th</sup> century liberalism were the miracles attributed to our Lord in the New Testament. These were regarded by the Liberals as naive, pre-scientific myths that had somehow found their way into the original documents of Scripture. Also in the target of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Liberals was the doctrine of the Virgin Birth, the Transfiguration, the atoning death of Christ and the bodily Resurrection. We have already noticed the attack on Scripture as the inspired Revelation of God.

The problem for some ministers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century who embraced these principles was, what now was available and left for them to actually preach on from the pulpit or do within the life of the church? Perhaps the more honest ones simply resigned their positions. A large number however adopted the approach of seeking to reconstruct the mission of the church, and reinterpret the meaning of the Gospel.

This reinterpretation of the meaning of the Gospel was a subtle moving towards a position which said that the mission of Christianity was not to bring personal redemption through the cross and the shed blood of Christ, but rather to bring about a social redemption by alleviating as far as possible human suffering.

It is true that the Church of Jesus Christ throughout the centuries, has had as a secondary aspect of its work the alleviation of suffering and distress on the practical and social level. But up until this point any idea of seeking to reconstruct society whilst ignoring the redemption of the individual was unthinkable.

Bready in his, *England Before and After Wesley*, well summed up the traditional view on this.

*As a prophet of God and an ordained ambassador of Christ, he did not conceive it his task to formulate economic, political and social theories; nor did he judge himself confident so to do. His "calling" he believed was far more sacred, and more thoroughgoing. It was to lead men into contact with spiritual reality, to enable them to possess their souls and enter the realms of abundant life. For once men, in sufficient numbers, were endowed with an illumined conscience and spiritual insight they, collectively as well as individually, would become possessors of the "wisdom that the passeth knowledge"; and in the light of that wisdom social problems gradually would be solved.*

Our Lord said: *The first of all the commandments is; "Here O Israel, The Lord our God, is one Lord:*

*And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment.*

*And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.*

Mark 12:29 - 31.

How can men and women love God while they are at enmity with him? How can people be addressed as "Israel" unless they belong to "Israel"? Reconciliation is the first requirement and the means of that reconciliation is the Gospel.

The same principle can be seen in William Wilberforce's famous book, *A Practical View.. Of the Prevailing Religious System of Professing Christians in the Higher and Middle Classes in this Country Contrasted with Real Christianity.*

Wilberforce was seeking to abolish the Slave Trade and reform manners in the country, by which of course he meant morals. He knew however as the book "*A Practical View*", makes plain that this could not be achieved unless individuals were truly converted. He saw the preaching of the Gospel and individual conversion is the main need. He was strong on emphasising original sin and man's corrupt nature, and he was utterly convinced of the primacy of conversion, making it plain that until men and women are new by the Holy Spirit, there will never be genuine external reformation.

**One of the chief proponents of the social gospel at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the American Walter Rauchenbusch.**

Rauchenbusch identified the kingdom of God with social reform. He said, "Wherever corporations abandon monopoly capitalism for the "law of service", or undemocratic nations submit to real democracy, there with they step out of the Kingdom of Evil into the Kingdom of God.

True evangelicals believe that the Gospel brings as one of its fruits social reform, we must not make the mistake as many are doing today in believing that, the Gospel is itself social reform.

.....**Conclusion**.....

**Let us close by looking at some of the conclusions drawn from Pool -Connor's, The Apostasy of English Nonconformity (p. 70, 71 ...)**

1. The first point made by E.J. Poole- Connor was an answer to those who argued that it could not be true to speak of the apostasy of Nonconformity in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when most, or at least a considerable part of the congregations of the various denominational churches, did not agree with their modernistic leaders.

Pool- Connor made the point that Congregational and Baptist churches have an element of democracy in their constitutions and therefore such individuals bore some responsibility for allowing men who denied the fundamentals of the faith to hold powerful positions as leaders in their denominations. **A responsibility on all believers to resist error**

2. His second point was to answer those who said that in dealing with error, the right course is not to protest, but to preach positive truth. Fully agreeing that preaching positive truth is essential, he nevertheless argued that habitually to avoid controversy, is, in the first place, contrary to Apostolic precept and example, and, in the second, obviously ineffective in practice. He went on to say the result of doing no more than to "preach positive truth," is that in almost every sphere - religious, educational and literary - modernism has practically swept the field. **The idea of not directly opposing error and simply preaching positive truth is not enough.**
3. He answered those who said the need for unity is of such urgent importance that it is inexpedient to introduce disruptive topics; and that the spirit of Christian love should be shown in a gracious tolerance of opposing views.

**He agreed that there are some aspects of the Christian life and practice on which believers may legitimately differ in their opinions or interpretations, however when it comes to questions of authority and religion, and the divine way of acceptance for the sinner, compromise is too heavy a price to pay. Compromise in this sort of area usually paves the way for a larger apostasy.**

4. He answered the arguments of those who remained in compromised denominations, with the spirit of remaining within so that they may influence a return back orthodoxy. We all have genuine sympathy with people who take this view, but as he points out such a situation often involves compromise or cooperation with those who hold very different views, and in the end it is usually the case that very little is achieved by such a policy.

We might also add the comments of some others who were contending for the faith around the same time as C.H. Spurgeon in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

James Stalker commented on the subject of religious controversy.

*Dread of controversy is in itself a dangerous thing. Controversy for its own sake I hate; but on the other extreme is equally an evil.*

Dr Stalker in his *Imago Christi*, shows that:

*To avoid it is neither Christ – like nor apostolic, and adds, it is no good sign that controversy is looked down upon.... For excessive aversion to controversy may be an indication that the church has no keen sense of possessing truth that is of any great worth, and that it has lost appreciation of the infinite difference in value between truth and error.*

(Quoted by David Fountain in *Contending for the Faith*.)

We may also call from J.C. Ryle on this important subject:

*Controversy in religion is a hateful thing... But there is one thing which is even worse than controversy, and that is false doctrine tolerated, allowed, and permitted without protest or molestation. It was controversy that won the battle of the Protestant Reformation.... There are times when controversy is not only a duty but a benefit.... **It is our plain Scriptural duty to “content earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints.”** ( Jude 3).*

J.C. Ryle. *Banner of Truth* article, May 2016.

I will leave the final words to E.J. Poole Connor:

*“The Reformation was mainly a return to Apostolic teaching, the rediscovery of doctrines buried under human accretions. To go forward it was necessary to go back to the faith once for all delivered to the saints. Let there be such a return in our day; for in spite of the confident assertions of modern theologians, scholarship and truth are not all on one side. Let the testimony to the Evangelical faith be clear and unhesitating; let it be accompanied (in God’s grace) by loving compassion, spiritual power, and righteousness of life; ..... and who can tell what (blessings) may lie before us? At the very least the old prophetic word shall be again fulfilled,*

*“Then they feared the Lord spake often one to another; and the Lord hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before Him for them that feared the Lord, and that thought upon His name.”*

*The Apostasy of English Non – Conformity* p.75.