

"THE WANING OF EVANGELICALISM."

"WHAT remains but the teaching of catastrophe? 'The ax will be laid to the root of the tree.' In such a manner Richard Heath closes a striking article, bound to create discussion, in *The Contemporary Review* (May). It is an indictment of the Evangelical movement started by Law, carried on by Wesley and Whitefield, later by Finney, later still by Moody, Spurgeon, and 'General' Booth, for its neglect of a great opportunity, its failure to interpret God's message in history, its disloyalty to the masses, and its blindness to the great truth of the unity and solidarity of humanity. As a result of all this, it is a waning movement – rapidly waning. It has failed to hear the voices of the prophets – of Maurice and Carlyle and Ruskin and Tolstoi. 'What remains but the teaching of catastrophe?'

"Mr. Heath's article is divided into four parts, the first of which describes the rise and spread of Evangelicalism, the second arrays facts showing its decline, the third aims to dispel the idea that this decline is due to agnostic or skeptic views, and the fourth is an attempt to portray the real causes of decline. By Evangelicalism he means the movement that is really one in doctrine with the Methodist revival movement of the Wesleys, being based upon the fall of man, the sacrifice of Christ not only on behalf of man but in place of man, grace the sole originating cause of man's salvation, justification the sole instrumental cause, the need of a new birth, and of the constant and sustaining action of the holy spirit. These doctrines were already imbedded in the formularies of the Church of England and Nonconformist creeds when the Evangelical movement began. But the revivalists took them seriously and lived up to them. The movement has spread to vast proportions. Revivalism has been its most characteristic feature, but not its chief source of influence. Two hundred thousand sermons every Sunday – more than ten million a year – can be attributed to it. Thousands of missionaries have been sent out by it, great non-denominational and non-ecclesiastical societies have been formed by it, a vast number of

churches and chapels have been built by it. It awoke English religion out of its torpor, has produced generations of remarkable pulpit orators, and attained such power that it may be called *the* English religion of the nineteenth century, and became a leading if not *the* leading fact in the history of English-speaking lands for two centuries.

Now the movement is waning. In the Church of England, the Evangelical clergyman may say with the lonely worshiper of Jehovah:

"I watch, and am become
Like a sparrow alone on the housetop.'

"According to the Bishop of Liverpool, 'the Evangelical clergy are to day but a small minority of the Church of England.' The great Evangelical institutions are burdened with growing deficits. The Evangelical denominations are declining in membership, or at least not keeping pace with the population. The Baptists (in England) just about keep pace with the population. The Wesleyans increased but 5 per cent. from 1888 to 1896, while the population increased 7½ per cent. In Birmingham and Liverpool, while the church accommodations have been greatly enlarged since 1861, the attendance upon the services has actually decreased. In this country a similar waning of power is seen in the fact that the Congregational and Presbyterian bodies returned, in 1896, 3,000 churches which did not report a member added in the previous year by profession of faith. In Europe we find the same state of things, but much aggravated. The *Huguenot*, a monthly organ of the Reformed churches of France, declared in 1893 that the French Protestant churches are declining at the rate of one church (6,000 members) a year, and at this rate there will be no more Protestants in France at the end of the next century. In Berlin, it is said, only 10 per cent. of the population attend church and in Hamburg only 12½ per cent. If these figures and facts are not convincing, Mr. Heath refers us to 'the voice of the people,' [R2322 : page 185] as heard in the letters from the working classes sent in 1897 to *The Methodist Times*, of

London, in response to an invitation to them to tell the reasons for their non-attendance at church.

"Very briefly Mr. Heath dismisses the surmise that general agnosticism is to blame for this alienation of the people from the Evangelical churches. 'All who really know the people,' he asserts, 'know that they are quite as truly religious as they ever were, and those who have mingled freely with them must feel that it is not Christianity as taught in the New Testament, but as practically exemplified by the nineteenth-century Christianity, that they repudiate.'

"What, then, is the reason for the waning of Evangelicalism? Says Mr. Heath:

"Evangelicalism, coming into existence under an extremely individualistic and competitive order of things, has seen nothing in the Gospel but a plan of individual salvation. It has had but little idea of the common salvation, of the unity of mankind in Christ, and of the mutual responsibility of all men. It has hardly seemed to understand that a divine Helper was in *the world*, opening men's eyes to what is evil, gradually giving them higher notions of what is right, and a better judgment as to the real good and the real evil; and, failing to comprehend this, Evangelicalism has never understood the age in which it has run its course.'

"The attitude of the early Evangelical leaders, Wesley, Whitefield, Howell, Harris, Fletcher, and others, in condemnation of the French Revolution and the American Revolution, are cited in illustration of the above statement. Hannah More published with 'the approbation of the whole Evangelical party' her 'Village Politics; or, Will Chip,' ridiculing the notion of equality and fraternity. The power and energy of Evangelicalism have been centered upon the upper middle class, whose sole idea of life was to struggle upward, let the rest of mankind sink as they might. Its dependence on this class has made Evangelicalism 'shut its eyes more closely than ever to the great social revolution which,

commencing in the last century, is still going on.' Mr. Heath continues his indictment:

"Evangelicalism has denied God in history, has refused to recognize his providential government of the world, or if it has not formally taken up this infidel position, it has treated the question with a true English contempt for consistency. God was in the Reformation, but not in the Revolution. He came to judge Christendom in the sixteenth century, but not in the eighteenth. It is this indifference to truth, when truth interferes with prejudice and interest, that has done so much harm to Evangelicalism.

"For this blindness to the great social sunrise which has lit up the whole century, and is gradually leading to the emancipation of the laboring classes in Europe and America, has lost Evangelicalism the opportunity it has desired – to be the herald to them and all the world of the great salvation. And still more this blindness has strengthened in it that hardness of heart and contempt of God's Word and commandment which characterizes the whole of Christendom, and which is one of the reasons why its official representatives have not only lost their hold on the masses, but have driven into antagonism so many of the more conscientious and finer souls in Europe and America.

"This hardness of heart has not only appeared in the methods at times adopted by Evangelical revivalists, but more especially in the astonishing lack of Christian brotherhood displayed in all sections of Evangelicalism, even to the point of permitting those who have worked for the Gospel as their agents and representatives to sink into being recipients of parish relief or to die in the hospital or workhouse. And in that class which has afforded Evangelicalism such support, and whose families have been its peculiar domain, how many hundreds of merchants, traders, and farmers, of whom it has made much in their prosperity, has it allowed, when ruin overtook them, to die broken-hearted or in bitterness of spirit?

"Contempt of God's Word and commandment is a serious charge, but can it be said to be too severe a description of a movement which has systematically and persistently ignored the main teaching of the Gospels? If in Christ, as Evangelicalism has always taught, 'dwelt the fulness of the Godhead bodily,' if he was in fact the divine Wisdom teaching men the [R2323 : page 185] true way of life, how can Evangelicalism be acquitted of contempt of God's Word when, in place of obeying his commandments, it has led its followers to regard the Sermon on the Mount as an impossible ideal which no sensible man could really think of taking as a rule of life? – causing men, therefore, to regard God's Word as something Quixotic and Utopian.'

"Because of this 'hardness of heart' Evangelicalism has failed to understand contemporary history, failed to see that revelation is continuous, failed to recognize the great truth of the unity and solidarity of humanity.

"The old Evangelicalism is waning; but this waning may precurse a new waxing:

"As among the decay of a past summer we often see, ere winter is over, new shoots springing up which will be the glory of the coming year, so it is with present-day Evangelicalism – its spiritual life is already taking new forms. Efforts to do away with sectarianism and to repair the broken unity of the church, efforts to find expression in the church for the mind and soul of the coming generation, efforts to live the life [R2323 : page 186] which Christ himself enjoined on his disciples, efforts to share in the sufferings of the miserable, sunk in the sordid life of the slums, and to lift them out of it – such efforts, and many similar ones, may indicate the coming of a new Evangelicalism."

– *The Literary Digest.*

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We publish the foregoing for the sake of the truth it contains, and as a basis for criticism. Mr. Heath's views, briefly stated, are, –

(1) That the religion of *personal salvation* (by which is meant escape or "salvation" of a few from a hell of eternal torment to which the vast majority hasten and are "lost") has had its day and is on the decline. In this he is undoubtedly correct even to a far greater extent than his statistics show; for large proportions of those who are members of various "*Evangelical* churches," and of those who still flock to hear Moody, Jones and others, are in part or in whole persuaded that the theory of eternal torment is at least questionable, and hence the Evangelical *salvation from it* questionable also.

(2) That there is an astonishing lack of Christian brotherhood – lack of interest in the temporal welfare of the world or even in the temporal welfare of the "saved" brotherhood. The recent tendencies toward social uplift are credited not to Evangelical salvation theories, but rather to their decline. He credits these evidences of "good will to men" to the broader and more benevolent views of modern Christianity, which is now taking shape in efforts toward the social-uplift.

Is there not considerable truth in this charge? Is it not true that the teaching that the vast majority of mankind is hastening to a hell of eternal torture, and that those who do not become saints richly deserve this fate, has a tendency to harden the heart and to dull all the finer sentiments? Surely those considered worthy of eternal woe could not be considered worthy of much consideration or mercy in the misfortunes of the present life.

And in proportion as the real spirit of love is lacking and fervor for denominational progress in "saving souls" takes its place, everything not of *utility to the one object* is likely to be neglected. Hence, those able to render aid are esteemed for their usefulness rather than loved; and when they cease to be useful they are in danger of neglect.

(3) In Mr. Heath's judgment, from the roots of dying Evangelicalism is sprouting a new and better Christianity which

recognizes "the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man" and whose gospel is civilization, social-uplift, good citizenship, on the basis of the Golden Rule, "Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them."

While bound to admit the fact here claimed, respecting the trend of Christianity, we cannot endorse the conclusions. We dissent.

The tendency of human thought seems to be to go from one extreme to another; hence the need of a divine revelation to guide our judgments, – especially on religious subjects. "To the law and to the testimony, – if they speak not according to this rule, it is because there is no light in them." (Isa. 8:20.) The Scriptures make the entire subject plain and harmonious and satisfy our longings as nothing else can do. They do indeed show us a *personal salvation*, but not from eternal torture. They show us that "the wages of sin is *death* [not torment] but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." They set before "believers" a great *prize* to be sought during this age, and to be won by a "little flock." They also set before us a *mark* or standard of life endeavor necessary to be attained by all who would gain that prize. That *mark* is the spirit or disposition of self-sacrificing love, which rejoices not in iniquity but rejoices in the truth – in doing "good unto *all men* as we have opportunity, especially to the household of faith." This is the *personal salvation* of the Scriptures, misinterpreted by so called "Evangelicalism."

Nor are the Scriptures silent respecting the much needed *social uplift*. God has not been unmindful of the poor world's necessities. In the next age – the Millennial age – he will uplift the world to a degree that eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither hath entered into the heart of man – but which he has revealed to his faithful in his Word.

God's Word is full of promises respecting the glorious epoch, the golden age, when "the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord" (Isa. 11:9; Hab. 2:14); when "every man shall sit under *his* vine and under *his* fig tree; and none shall make them afraid" (Micah 4:4); when

"they shall not build, and another inhabit," but when home ownership shall be general (Isa. 65:21-23); when every high one shall be humbled, and every lowly one shall be lifted up (Luke 1:52; Matt. 23:12) when "the Lord shall pour out his spirit upon all flesh." (Joel 2:28.) The Apostle Peter speaks of that epoch as "times of refreshing" and "times of restitution," and declares that every holy prophet since the world began prophesied of that time, and that it would begin at the second advent of our Lord Jesus Christ. – Acts 3:19-21.

Thus the Bible-taught Christian finds in the faith once delivered to the saints all the aliments for spiritual nutrition. He has before his mind the straitness of the narrow way and the necessity for heart religion and full personal conversion and consecration to God without hardness and bigotry and uncharitableness [**R2323 : page 187**] toward others. Indeed, his sympathies for men become more and more deep, as he realizes that all are fallen from the image of God and are by heredity weak, and that Satan, the god of this world, is persistently deceiving them.

Furthermore, the hope for the world in the next age – its mental, moral and physical uplift – is indissolubly united to his hopes and personal salvation; because the very hope set before him in the gospel is that, by personal victory and salvation and the attainment of the *mark* of the prize of his high calling, he shall become a sharer in the great work of uplifting humanity during the Millennium – helping whosoever then will to return through Christ and the New Covenant to fullest divine favor, including life everlasting.

Such cannot agree to the *common* fatherhood of God and the common brotherhood of men; for they well know that only those who have the Father's spirit are "sons of God." (Rom. 8:14.) They know to the contrary the meaning of our Lord Jesus' words to some evil doers of his day, "Ye are of your father the devil, and his works ye do." – John 8:44.

But while distinctly identifying the two fathers' families – the children of God and the children of the devil, and pointing out the mistake of confounding the two, we, nevertheless, are able from the divine Word and standpoint to see that many of Satan's followers and children are deceived, and we look forward with joy and expectancy to the time when Immanuel shall take his great power and bind Satan that his deception of mankind should cease, and that all may be brought to a knowledge of good as well as of evil, of truth as well as of falsehood, – a knowledge of the Lord, whom to intelligently accept is life eternal.
