

Background to Lambeth (1)

Bible and its Authority

THE STRENGTH AND WEAKNESS OF FUNDAMENTALISM

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This week the "Church Times" begins a series of special articles under the general heading, "Background to Lambeth." They will follow the subjects to be discussed by the various Commissions in the Lambeth Conference.

The first of these is the Holy Bible and its Authority. Under this head, one of the pressing problems that is bound to crop up for discussion is present-day Fundamentalism. In England there is a considerable school of Fundamentalists, and in America there is plenty of controversy over "liberal" Fundamentalism. The Lambeth Commission will have to face this, and give some pronouncement on biblical theology.

IT is not easy to attempt an analysis of the strength and the weakness of so complex a phenomenon as that to which the name "Fundamentalism" is commonly given. The name itself is misleading and disrespectful. What it denotes, in the context of the present-day religious situation in this country, is the "conservative Evangelicalism" typical of the Inter-Varsity Fellowship and its constituent societies, a most powerful Christian force especially in schools and universities, and a movement which, in its impact on the Church of England, is producing many ordinances as well as devoted laymen.

Something Definite

The spiritual strength of such conservative Evangelicalism is generally recognized, and scarcely needs to be described afresh. It has been generously and truly assessed by Fr. Hebert in his recent book, *Fundamentalism and the Church of God*. Perhaps its chief merit is its understanding of, and insistence upon, the reality of conversion. Those who are commonly called Fundamentalists have shown the way to other Christians in the directness and simplicity of their teaching about the acceptance of Christ, involving personal decision, and, however it may be reached, a realization of self-committal in response to the grace of God in Christ.

At the same time, there can be no doubt that a considerable part of the attractiveness of this type of Christianity lies in its dogmatic assurance. It offers definite teaching, based upon a particular understanding of the inspiration of scripture, and a clear-cut body of doctrine which it claims to read out of the inerrant pages of the Bible. It provides an answer to the quest for unassailable certainty, and it is here, rather than in any supposed appeal to religious emotion, that the secret of its influence is to be found.

Here, too, is the root of its best characteristic — its strong and vital outward-looking missionary spirit which it ought to share (but too often does not) with all genuinely evangelical Christianity; and at the same time of its narrow sectarianism and its rigid attitude towards biblical interpretation. These features of the movement have caused much concern in recent years, especially to those who work in the sphere of religious education.

Truth and Faith

It is true that the menace of Fundamentalism has often been exaggerated. Conservative views about the nature of biblical inspiration, or about the authorship and dating of the various books, can hardly be stigmatized as heretical. It would be strange indeed if the Church were to demand as a test of orthodoxy in 1960 the acceptance of the views of those whom the bulk of its members harried and persecuted as infidels in 1860. Nevertheless, the objections to the "IVF" theology are serious, as Fr. Hebert and others have recently pointed out.

Essentially they are the same as those which Protestants commonly feel when they are confronted with certain aspects of Romanist teaching. Here, too, the Bible is approached, not in a spirit of humble enquiry, seeking to discover what it really is and what it says, but in the light of preconceived dogmatic assumptions read

into, rather than out of, the scriptures, and resting on no more secure a foundation than a vaguely defined "tradition."

Here, too, there seems to be scant recognition of the God of the Bible as the God of truth, who is best glorified by a patient and diligent following of the critical reason to whatever conclusions it may lead, but dishonoured by prejudice or by intellectually dishonest apologetics.

Faith Depreciated

Here, too, faith seems to be depreciated. It may mean something very different from the believer's personal and saving faith in Christ as Lord and Saviour. It may mean the unquestioning acceptance of propositions that are open to rational doubt — a sense in which "faith" appears not infrequently to be used in popular Roman thought. A good example of this tendency in conservative Evangelicalism is to be seen in the contention of Mr. A. M. Stibbs (*The New Bible Commentary*) that "a surer faith" would enable those who deny the authenticity of the Pastoral Epistles to accept them as Pauline.

Here, too, above all, is the same inclination to confuse what is divine and supernatural with the earthly and human medium through which it is revealed and communicated to us. The parallel has often been drawn between the Fundamentalist identification of the divine Word in scripture with the human and fallible writings which mediate it to the reader, and the popular medieval identification of the sacramental Body with the form of bread in which it is communicated to the recipient. In both systems, it would seem, there is a common tendency to seek a way of escape from the necessary Christian tension of faith and doubt, and, by looking for infallibility where there is none, to substitute a dull and prosaic literalism for the heights of Christian faith.

Conservative Criticism

These errors are a very different matter from mere conservatism about questions of literary and historical criticism. A conservative point of view, arrived at after a full study of the evidence and a careful weighing of rival theories, is entirely legitimate. The history of biblical scholarship suggests that it may often prove more satisfactory than an extreme "critical" position.

Most present-day conservatives, however, have never approached the text prepared without bias to enquire into the literary and historical problems of its origin, context and background. They have by-passed the critical discipline of the past century of biblical study, and they find it correspondingly difficult to appreciate the significance of modern biblical theology. They come to the scriptural books with their minds made up, applying their own dogmatic preconceptions to the Bible.

Among these, is the conviction that the biblical books are essentially different from all other literature, not in their theological content alone but also in their composition, literary form and expression, so that the ordinary canons of literary and historical criticism cannot be applied to them. Thus, it is generally taken as axiomatic in Fundamentalist commentaries that where a biblical book actually contains within itself some claim to authorship, as in the case of the Pastorals or Daniel, this must be accepted without further question. The common ancient literary conventions,

such as pseudepigraphy, which would be recognized in the case of other books, are ignored.

Questions of authorship and "background" are thus prejudged in the light of extraneous dogmatic beliefs. So, too, is the interpretation of the text itself. A doctrine of inerrancy is imposed on it which, after due allowance has been made for errors in transmission or translation, virtually requires that no biblical writer may be supposed to have penned a factually untrue statement. Hence come the immense difficulties which Fundamentalist commentaries pile up for themselves.

The real objection to this doctrine, however, is that it seeks to evade the paradox that God speaks through real human agents, men specially gifted by grace but not exempted by a peculiar miracle from the ignorance and fallibility of all mortals, and that divine inspiration comes through the thoughts and aspirations of men conditioned and limited by the beliefs and the circumstances of their time.

The conservative attitude to scripture is badly affected by the very widespread theological error which seeks to possess the divine treasure without its earthen vessels. This is the monophysite heresy (which itself appears sometimes in conservative apologetics, when our Lord's ascription of a Psalm to David is held to settle the question of its authorship) translated into other terms. The ultimate source of the dogma of inerrancy, like that of the dogma of papal infallibility, is an unfounded conviction that God must have acted in a particular way in order to communicate his self-revelation, and a refusal to accept, in all humility, the paradox that in fact he has not. So, for too many conservatives, a doctrine founded only upon the tradition of one group of Christians imprisons the Spirit within the narrow confines of the written word.

The Atonement

The supreme example of traditional dogma being read into the Bible is to be found in the usual conservative treatment of the Atonement. An uncompromising adherence to that view of the Atonement which sees it in terms of vicarious punishment is the theological and religious centre of conservative Evangelicalism. Here, rather than in the doctrine of verbal inspiration, lies the touchstone by which conservatives judge the beliefs of other Christians.

Yet it is doubtful whether this doctrine, which lays a right emphasis on the heinousness of sin only at the cost of compromising the justice of God, and of substituting the categories of the law-court for those of personal relationship, can properly be extracted from scripture at all. Substitution, Christ taking the place of sinners, is indeed central to New Testament thought; but penal substitution, if it is to be found at all, is, at the most, one among many facets of the redemptive work of Christ which the Bible holds together.

Sectarian Religion

It follows from this distortion of the balance of scriptural teaching that the doctrine of redemption tends to become dissociated from the doctrine of creation. It is scarcely true that conservative Evangelical religion is individualist; its sense of the fellowship of the believing Church is unusually strong. It is, however, certainly sectarian, concerned to win souls out of the world rather than to redeem society.

As Dr. Ramsey puts it: "The act of decision and conversion . . . abstracts a man from his place and duty in society, and society becomes the mere stage and scenery alongside which the moral decisions are made. The moral will is separated from its context, because the appeal is made to less than the whole man as a reasoning being and a social being." Such is the inevitable result of the Fundamentalist's failure to submit himself with genuine openness of mind and heart to the scriptures whose authority he claims.

Next week: *Church Unity* — "Lambeth and Reunion," by the Rev. Harold Riley.