

The Guilt of the Higher Critical Movement

Maurice Roberts

I wish to take as my subject the theme "The Guilt of the Higher Critical Movement". In the course of my remarks I shall, of course, be positive as well as negative. But I take this subject because I feel profoundly that the Higher Critics have perpetuated a great crime on the Church and, indeed, on the world. Their influence has, from the standpoint of the present day, been very decidedly a harmful and a negative one. I am prepared to believe that not all of them may have meant to be negative. But I am entirely convinced that one hundred years of their influence in the Church in this land (to look no farther afield) has been little short of catastrophic. As we look at the average pulpit today we are reminded at once of the words of the great prophets and of Christ Himself when referring to the false teachers of the past or of their day:

"The prophets shall become wind, and the word *is* not in them" (Jeremiah 5:13). "The prophets prophesy lies in my name: I sent them not, neither have I commanded them, neither spake unto them: they prophesy unto you a false vision and divination, and a thing of nought, and the deceit of their heart" (Jeremiah 14:14). "Woe be unto the pastors that destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! saith the LORD" (Jeremiah 23:1). "O my people, they which lead thee cause *thee* to err, and destroy the way of thy paths" (Isaiah 3:12). "Do ye not therefore err, because ye know not the scriptures, neither the power of God?" (Mark 12:24). "Ye hypocrites, well did Esaias prophesy of you, saying, This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with *their* lips; but their heart is far from me. But in vain they do worship me, teaching *for* doctrines the commandments of men... Let them alone: they be blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch" (Matthew 15:7-14).

In the light of such Scriptures as these I am bound to say that I cannot but look on the whole Liberal and Higher Critical Movement as a guilty

backsliding away from God. More than that, it has been, I believe, a movement of apostasy. The tragedy is that it has had a most corrosive influence on the life of the Church and of society as a whole. It has taught our nation to have low views of Christ and the gospel. It has taught congregations to condone false doctrine. It has taught preachers to speak falsehoods in the name of the Lord. All of this is evident enough to any reader of the current religious press. It is clear too from what goes by the name of “Christianity” over the radio and T.V.

As I see it, there is great guilt lying at the doors of these who one hundred years ago and more advanced these Higher Critical theories and who introduced them into the Church of Jesus Christ.

I. The Higher Critical Movement has been Guilty of Rejecting the Testimony of the Church to the Infallibility of the Bible for the previous 1900 years.

1. A century ago Dr. W. Sanday, himself an eminent British scholar, but one sympathetic to the Higher Critical Movement, could frankly admit that the Early Church Fathers were all unanimous in their view that the Bible is inspired and entirely trustworthy: “Testimonies”, he said, “to the general doctrine of Inspiration could be multiplied to almost any extent; but there are some which go further and point to an ‘inspiration’ which might be described as ‘verbal’; nor does this idea come in tentatively and by degrees, but almost from the very first” (*Inspiration* p.34).
2. This is easily verified by reference to the Church Fathers. I give just a few brief examples to show that in the Early Church our view and, may I say, the Bible League’s view of Holy Scripture as verbally inspired and inerrant, was the view of the Early Church:
 - (i) **Origen**: “The Holy Spirit was co-worker with the Evangelists in their composition of the gospel, and that, therefore, lapse of memory, error or falsehood was impossible to them (On Matthew 16:12 and John 6:18).
 - (ii) **Irenaeus** (pupil of Polycarp): “The Scriptures are perfect, seeing they are spoken by God’s word and by his Spirit” (*Adv. Haer.* ii.28).
 - (iii) **Augustine**: says he “firmly believes that no one of their authors has erred in anything in writing.

This was the universally held view of the great martyrs, theologians, writers and preachers of the Early Church (*Ep. ad Hier.* xxxii.3).

3. And so it was, too, of the **Reformation**.

Let me give one or two direct quotations from our Reforming Fathers:

- (i) **Luther**: declares that the whole of the Scriptures are to be ascribed to the Holy Ghost, and therefore cannot err (*Works*, St. Louis, xix, 305).
- (ii) **Calvin**: says that the Scriptures are to be received by us with the same reverence which we give to God “because they have emanated from him alone, and are mixed with nothing human” (*Inst.* 1:18, and commentaries on Romans 15, etc.).
- (iii) **Samuel Rutherford** declares that the Scriptures are a more sure word than a direct oracle from heaven (*Against Pretended Liberty of Conscience*, p. 373).
- (iv) **Richard Baxter** declares: “All that the holy writers have recorded is true” (*Works*, XV. 65).
- (v) **Westminster Confession**: “All [the sixty-six books of the Bible] are given by inspiration of God, to be the rule of faith and life.” “The authority of the holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man or church, but wholly upon God, who is truth itself, the author thereof; and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God”. The Confession adds later: “The Old Testament in Hebrew, and the New Testament in Greek ... are immediately inspired of God”.

4. This view was held by the **Medieval Church** also, and to this the Council of Trent bears witness when it says that God is the author of Scripture. Even the first Vatican Council of 1870, which made the odious dogma of papal infallibility (and is therefore anything but the mouthpiece of “Fundamentalism”!) could say this: “The church holds the books of the Old and New Testaments to be sacred and canonical ... because ... written by the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, they have God for their author”.

This then was the Church’s doctrine of the Bible till the Higher Critical Movement came along in the nineteenth century. Then everything altered in the Colleges, Universities and, I fear, in most of the pulpits

of this country. It was a mighty and a massive decline from the Church's attitude to Scripture during the previous nineteen hundred years. It is something therefore for which the Higher Critical Movement must be deemed culpable and guilty.

II. A Survey of the Higher Criticism shows it was Guilty of Undermining Confidence in the Scriptures.

1. The year of noticeable change in Britain apparently was 1860. Before that year it had been in Germany only that the Higher Critical Movement received acceptance amongst a large number. But events in Britain were to alter public opinion now in favour of the Higher Criticism in and after this year 1860. One influence was the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* in 1859. Then in 1860 came a book entitled *Essays and Reviews*. This comprised seven essays. The essay by Benjamin Jowett, entitled "On the Interpretation of Scripture" gave especial offence even after it was modified at the suggestion of the poet Tennyson. But Jowett's essay shows a typically low view of the Bible.

It is difficult for us to understand, perhaps, how prominent churchmen of that time were developing attitudes to Scripture which were so much at variance with the Church's dogma concerning an infallible Bible up to that time. But it is necessary for us to understand something of the change that was coming and I give one example drawn from *Essays and Reviews*.

Frederick Temple, who was Headmaster of Rugby School and later Archbishop of Canterbury, in his essay, used this offensive comparison to illustrate the nature of God's revelation to mankind. He compared the human race to a colossal man who went through three stages: childhood, youth and then manhood. According to Frederick Temple God adapts His teaching to mankind at each stage of man's development. In the childhood of the human race, therefore, God reveals to mankind how to live by laws. In the youth of mankind God taught us to live by examples, but now that we have come to our manhood as a race, God teaches us by principle.

In the Scriptures, he says, are to be sought these principles by which nineteenth century mature man is to live. If "careful criticism" should "prove that there have been occasional interpolation and forgeries in

the Book the result need not be unwelcomed. The teaching of the Bible remains unaffected by any changes in the idea of inspiration which present knowledge necessitates”.

By 1861 this book *Essays and Reviews* had already passed its tenth edition and was having a widespread and harmful influence on the attitude of churchmen in this country and elsewhere.

2. In 1862, Bishop J.W. Colenso of Natal, South Africa produced his notorious book *The Pentateuch and the Book of Joshua Critically Examined*. He rejected Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch and pronounced the Bible to be no infallible book. He then used a phrase which Professor F.D. Maurice, Professor of Moral Philosophy at Cambridge some years later, had used and which was to become a favourite with Liberals for decades to come: “The Bible may not be described as being the Word of God but may be allowed simply to contain the Word of God.”
3. In 1881 William Robertson Smith, Professor, I am afraid I have to say, in the Free Church of Scotland College in Aberdeen, brought out his book *The Old Testament in the Jewish Church*. This book was to mark a new era. Smith was popularising Old Testament German criticism. Following the notorious German critics Graf and Wellhausen, Smith gave wholehearted support to their critical approach to the Scriptures and to their theory that Israel’s religion came not by Divine and supernatural revelation but by a gradual process of evolution. Smith had to leave his post in the Free Church of Scotland and he took a Professorship in the University of Cambridge. But his influence lingered on in Scotland and did further harm. He brought out this book entitled *The Old Testament in the Jewish Church*, popular lectures given in Edinburgh and Glasgow to large audiences of lay people. In the short space of fifteen months the book sold 6,500 copies. It is astonishing to us to realise that he was arguing that the new approach to Scripture could be carried out in a way fully consistent with the Reformed Confessions and Catechisms of the Puritans! We know now looking back from our point of view that this optimism was misguided and ludicrous.

It is important for us to grasp that an entirely novel view of revelation and inspiration was emerging out of this school of critics. The old view had been that God had deposited His mind in a Book and that

the **words** of this Book as originally given were verbally reliable. But the new view was that revelation was something subjective. They said that revelation was God revealing Himself to **persons** in their own subconscious mind. Consequently, the Bible was now said to be, not God's revelation itself, but only a record of that revelation to man. But since it is a record of God's revelation given by men it contains verbal and historical errors. So the new view of revelation was not that it was something objective but subjective. The Bible, in other words, was now to be considered, not as an infallible Book, but as something less than that. Least of all, they said, was it to be thought of as teaching a set of theological propositions.

This note needs to be made very clear here. W.R. Smith was everywhere recognised as a man of remarkable brilliance and indeed genius, and because this attitude to Scripture and revelation was to become the general one from that day to this in most academic circles, we cannot too clearly inform ourselves as to the origins of this changed attitude.

There were these two main elements of major difference and emphasis in the new view of revelation. First, the history and religion of Israel were now regarded as a thing which had progressed by natural evolution and was shaped specifically by the prophets of Judah who lived centuries after Moses. Secondly, revelation was redefined as a subjective phenomenon. The Bible, they said, is a record of God's revelation but not identical with the revelation. The positions were now set, and as time went on these views became progressively entrenched in the academic circles of our country.

In 1889 another Liberal book entitled *Lux Mundi* came out. This was a collection of essays by several Oxford men and confessed to be an "attempt to put the Catholic faith into its right relation to modern intellectual and moral problems". It was to have a very far-reaching influence in this country. Its new emphasis was on the implications, as they supposed, of the Incarnation upon the Person of Christ.

The theory went like this: When Christ endorses the Old Testament Scriptures, He is speaking from the standpoint of a Jew and as a man. The Incarnation, they said, involved Christ in self-emptying (kenosis) and therefore His knowledge while on earth was natural and fallible. So what was emerging was not simply a different view now of the

history of Israel, but a new attitude to the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The view then could be summarised like this: The Jews had a mistaken idea that the Old Testament was verbally inspired and inerrant. Christ endorsed this mistaken idea because through His Incarnation He took on human infirmity and ignorance; the Christian Church in previous centuries had also ignorantly taken over this same view of an inspired and infallible Bible from the Jews and from Christ. But now mature nineteenth-century man with his scientific knowledge knew better than Christ or the Jews, and was therefore in a position to reject the old theory of verbal inspiration. He was now in a condition in which he could seek to find those abiding principles of truth by a rigorous application of the critical method. Incidentally, S.T. Coleridge, the poet, had had a similar view earlier in the century, but now this theory was to become very widely held.

In a sense, the *Lux Mundi* only said what many had been saying a little before this date, but its massive influence lay in its being a statement made by men of learning and prestige, and because of the clarity with which the book was written. It was to set the stage for later attacks upon the Person of our blessed Lord Himself. For example, in Adolph Harnack's *What is Christianity?* Jesus' life was now stripped of the miraculous and the supernatural.

"Jesus", they said, "never spoke of any kind of creed"! The next step was that of the dismal era in which men went out on a "Quest" for the "historical Jesus".

I have spent some time speaking about the details of what happened a century ago because that era was the turning point which has led to the chaotic ignorance of Christian doctrine and Christian religion in this country.

We need not hesitate to say, surely, that the Higher Critical Movement was guilty in the way it acted. It was not above making claims which were unreliable and irresponsible. Let me give one or two examples of this.

First, the leading scholars of this new school were fond of talking about "the assured results" of the new criticism. But that was a complete myth. The fact is that the "experts" (so called) could hardly

agree on anything among themselves. That is what made it so hard for orthodox scholars in Princeton in America, and in this country, to produce what might be called a definitive and permanent answer to their novel assertions. The critics were for ever altering their position and shifting their ground. This is not my view. It is the confession of men who were basically sympathetic to the critics themselves.

Take for instance these words of Prof. H.H. Rowley in 1951: "Many of the conclusions that seemed most sure have been challenged, and there is now a greater variety of views on many questions than has been known for a long time". So much then for the much-vaunted claims that Criticism was giving us some "assured results".

We can unhesitatingly state that the Higher Critical Movement made claims which were bogus and which turned out in the course of events to be unsubstantial and worthless. All this has led the Christian Church of that time (and subsequently) into great scepticism and ignorance.

Then, also, I point out that the Higher Critics were not above using the tactics of the bully against those who disagreed with them. They could, of course, point on their side to a list of impressive scholarly names: T.K. Cheyne, S.R. Driver, A.S. Peake, A.B. Bruce, W.R. Smith, Marcus Dods and many others. So they tended to write off the opposition as unscholarly. This was the case, for example, when Alfred Cave in 1888 attacked the Graf-Wellhausen theory. They simply dismissed him as an ignoramus! Unfortunately for them, they could not do this with a scholar of the status of Professor B.B. Warfield of Princeton. So in his case they simply held a conspiracy of silence. They could not evidently answer Warfield's strictures on the Higher Critical theories and so they simply ignored him!

My point is to show that the Higher Criticism with all its high claim to objective scholarship was really guilty of a great deal of dishonesty and even deception. For all of this it is chargeable with guiltiness in bringing great harm upon the Christian Church from that day to this.

III. The Higher Criticism has been Guilty of Contradicting Christ and His Apostles.

It must be a serious sin to contradict the eternal Son of God and it must be a sin with very grave consequences – one which is likely to bring a train of judgments upon a generation and nation guilty of so great an offence. But we may certainly affirm that this is what the whole Higher Critical Movement has done. It has played the devil's part in approaching Christ's Bride and tempting her with the old sinister question: "Yea, hath God said?"

Jesus Christ our Lord spoke most clearly on the question of the inspiration, authority and divine origin of the Bible. His pronouncements on the subject are perfectly clear:

- (1) "The Scripture", He said, "cannot be broken" (John 10:35).
- (2) "Thy Word is Truth" (John 17:17).
- (3) "Heaven and earth shall pass away: but my words shall not pass away" (Luke 21:33).
- (4) "For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled" (Matthew 5:18).

At this point I must refer to an acknowledged recent expert on the text of the New Testament, one whom the Higher Critics themselves cannot possibly despise. He is Professor Bruce M. Metzger of Princeton. According to Metzger there is no query at all in the manuscripts about the authenticity of any of these texts from Christ's preaching, which I quote above. Every statement is deemed, therefore, even by the critics, to be textually unimpeachable.

Who cannot see that the Higher Critics have therefore contradicted our Lord Jesus Christ's every affirmation concerning the reliability of the Bible? Their theories have been advanced specifically to show (as far as they could attempt to show) that the Word of God is *not* truth, and *can* be broken; that it is *not* the Word of God but merely *contains* the Word of God; that it is *not* trustworthy, and that it is certainly *not* infallible nor inerrant.

Again they have not only contradicted the dogmatic statements of Christ, but they have done the same with the statements of the Apostles of the New Testament, who are the master-builders of the

entire Christian Church of all ages. I give two representative statements from the apostolic writings:

- (1) In a well known passage the Apostle Paul affirms: "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God" (2 Timothy 3:16).

Here the term translated "by inspiration of God" is the one word in Greek "theopneustos". It bears the sense of "God-breathed". It does not mean to tell us that the Scriptures were first written by men and then had some added divine quality breathed into it afterwards. The meaning of Paul is that the Scriptures are those very words which God Himself breathed out. To use an old Puritan expression: "The Old and New Testaments are 'the lips of God'".

- (2) The Apostle Peter affirms the same doctrine: "The Scriptures came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost" (2 Peter 1:21).

The verb here translated "moved" might also be correctly rendered "carried" or "driven". It is a word conveying the sense of passivity in those who are so moved. In other words, the writers of Scripture were under such divine control and impulse that they were led to write precisely what God intended.

The Higher Critics have always scoffed at this doctrine. They resort often to caricature by terming it "the dictation theory" or "mechanical theory". But this is not what the Church of Christ has taught by its doctrine of inspiration. The style of Bible writers is distinct and personal to each man. The God who formed the personality of the writer and gave him the gifts, so influenced his activity as he wrote down words which became Scripture, that the precise terms, words, phrases, expressions and syllables in the original language were preserved which God intended to be preserved.

This is the way in which Christians have always looked on the Bible when they have been consistent with their own true character as the people of God. For them it is a divine book, inerrant, inspired and authoritative. It is the very Word of God and the rule of all our faith and practice. But the Higher Critics would not accept that. They could never agree among themselves as to the exact alternative. But like

Herod and Pilate they became friends at least for the purpose of denying that the Bible can be viewed as inerrant and wholly trustworthy.

Then, too, the Higher Critics laid the charge against evangelicals that we are guilty of reasoning in a circle. They put it something like this:

“You Evangelicals prove the Bible to be inerrant by quoting texts from the Bible itself. But that shows that you are assuming from the start the thing you are attempting to prove. And that”, they say, “is circular reasoning”. The answer, of course, to this Higher Critical charge is that they themselves are guilty of the very same thing in reverse. They assume the validity of the critical method and so they come to their conclusion that the Bible is not inerrant because it does not conform to their own first assumptions.

The fact is that all reasoning is “circular” in that sense, and it has to be. As Aristotle taught the world over two thousand years ago, syllogistic reasoning has a major premise, a minor premise and a conclusion. Everything depends on what your premises are. If you start with an infallible Bible you end with one; and if you start with a principle of human scepticism entitled “Higher Criticism” then you end inevitably with an unreliable Bible.

The difference is that we on our part have the explicit words of Christ and of the apostles on our side and we have also the explicit testimony of the Church’s most trusted spokesmen throughout nineteen hundred years of her history. They, for their part, have little more than their own subjective theories as to how the Bible came into existence.

We cannot shrink from our duty to God and to men by declaring that the Higher Critical Movement as a whole has been guilty of contradicting the explicit Word of God.

Interestingly enough, we have an academic witness to this very assertion. I refer to the conversion to Christ in recent years of a brilliant Bultmannian scholar named Eta Linnemann. Dr. Linnemann was for years a scholar working with the notorious Rudolph Bultmann and other prominent New Testament scholars, as they are called. She was a member of the Society for New Testament Studies

– a highly prestigious society – and was appointed as Professor of New Testament at Philippi University, Marburg, in Germany. She was a woman who rose very high in critical circles in recent years.

But Dr. Linnemann later had a deep spiritual experience which led her to see that her “Historical-Critical” theology was a lie and that God’s Word is truth.

In 1978 she literally threw her own highly rated books into the waste paper bin, resigned her Professorship and went to the Far East as a Bible Institute teacher. She has recently written a book as a humble Christian and says she is very conscious that her previous teaching was sinful and that she was one of the “blind leading the blind”. She is now eager to warn others away from the precipice of that error into which she had fallen herself. Her book appeared in 1990 under the title *Historical Criticism of the Bible: Methodology or Ideology? Reflections of a Bultmannian turned Evangelical*.

This remarkable occurrence in the providence of God, brings to our attention what is one of the most central lessons to be learned from the whole episode of the Higher Critical and Liberal Movement from its inception to the present day. It is this, that the most brilliant minds cannot understand the Bible unaided by the Holy Spirit.

It was the sin and tragedy of the Higher Critical Movement and of those who aligned themselves with it that they did not approach the Bible in the correct way. When men come to the Scriptures with some ready-made theory of their own, or when they suppose that they can pontificate on the meaning of Scripture without first bending their knee before God for His gracious teaching, they automatically disqualify themselves for that grace of illumination which is indispensable to the Bible student and to the Bible scholar. It is all too evident from the writings of Higher Critics that they did not excel in this virtue of self-abasement in the presence of Holy Scripture. For their arrogance they are chargeable with serious guilt.

Fourthly and lastly,

IV. The Higher Critical Movement has been Guilty of Robbing us of our Glorious Theological Heritage in this Country.

It was no accident that in proportion as the Higher Critical influence in this country grew, so interest in our great heritage of classical theology declined. It is entirely understandable that this should have been so. If the new criticism which swept across the land in and after 1860 was true then the older writers were worthless. A new theology had to be written in the light of the critical alterations to what were now outworn creeds of earlier centuries.

This was what the scholars attempted. And we need not be afraid to say that the attempt has proved a lamentable and a conspicuous failure. Once the Bible was set aside as no true text-book of theology, it was left to the ingenuity of men to reconstruct a theology for the Church. It was not long before the Church's creed therefore began to shrink drastically until today we have something like the following: A human Jesus without a Virgin Birth, without a bodily Resurrection and without miracles. We have: a God who is love but neither justice nor holiness. We have a gospel which is so atrophied that it might easily have been invented by a pre-Christian Greek philosopher who had never heard the preaching of the Apostles at all. We have a new morality which condones promiscuity, social abortion, homosexuality and looks sympathetically on euthanasia. We have, in a word, a Christianity which is shorn of all that is distinctive and unique. It is a travesty of the New Testament message and little wonder, therefore, if the people of this country have turned their backs on it in favour of Roman Catholicism, Islam, the New Age Movement, one or other of the cults, or, more probably, of the age-old Hedonism which says, "Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die."

On the other hand, the old Reformed theology is gaining momentum throughout this nation and throughout the world today. As I see it, that is where we are in this generation. One hundred years after the Bible League was founded in defence of the Word of God, we are, I believe, at the beginning of a new movement of the Spirit of God to recover truth and righteousness for our beloved Britain again – and for the world.

It has been a dark and terrible century since the Bible League was founded. Ironically and tragically, it has been especially dark and terrible in the conflicts we have seen between Britain and Germany,

where the Higher Criticism was so rampant. But it has been a dark age also in many nations throughout the world.

However, a door of hope appears now to be opening, and I wish to close on this note of hope and confidence for the future. God has given us the beginnings of something good and something great. It is not something new but a recovery of what was in the past, a theology based squarely upon Holy Scripture and which is consistent with doctrine which is "God-breathed". We have, as it were, now been given the books, but oh! how we long for the Holy Spirit of God to make this truth mighty and powerful in our own experience as churches and as communities! Oh! that God would indeed rend the heavens and come down!

But one thing at any rate is clear: the Bible is an old anvil which has broken many hammers. The Higher Critical hammer has now been shattered upon it and is increasingly silent. When all that scholars have done to destroy it is said and done, the Bible remains intact through the goodness of God to us as His people still. Oh! that He would appear therefore and vindicate His truth and gladden us by bringing in a new day of gospel power which will vindicate all that our forefathers stood for a century ago, and gladden the hearts of our children and our children's children in their generations to come! May God be thanked for His goodness to us and may His kingdom come in power and in demonstration of the Spirit of God.

Reopening the Wells of Truth

John Thackway

“And Isaac digged again the wells of water, which they had digged in the days of Abraham his father”

(Genesis 26:18)

Isaac, like his father Abraham, was a plain man dwelling in tents. A pilgrim and stranger in Canaan, he had no settled place to call his own. God had promised the land to his descendants the people of Israel – but that was yet future. In his lifetime he possessed the land in faith and hope, and that was his spiritual heroism. In Genesis 26:6 he has moved to Gerar, in the southern part of Canaan, in the land of the Philistines. The Lord prospered him there, but it brought on the envy of the Philistines (verse 14). One form this envy took was particularly malicious: “all the wells which his father’s servants had digged in the days of Abraham his father, the Philistines had stopped them, and filled them with earth” (verse 15).

The Philistines spitefully poured earth and rubbish down those wells, rendering them useless. It was common practice at the time, a kind of military strategy. In their view, Isaac had no right to this territory, so they deprived their “enemy” of vital supplies, much as when, after the Gulf War in 1991, Saddam Hussein set fire to the Kuwaiti oil wells.

So Isaac moved on to the valley of Gerar, out of range of Philistine hostility (verse 17). He found there some more old wells which his father had dug and which the Philistines had filled in. But this time he had them unblocked and put to use again: “And Isaac digged again the wells of water, which they had digged in the days of Abraham his father; for the Philistines had stopped them after the death of Abraham: and he called their names after the names by which his father had called them” (verse 18). This act had great significance. By it Isaac established contact with the past, and secured continuity for the future.

This supplies us with some useful lessons for our own time. We know that “whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning” (Romans 15:4). In these “wells of water” we have a vivid illustration of soul-

saving biblical truth. In ancient times a well was a shaft sunk down some depth to tap an underground river. Skin bottles lowered on ropes brought up the water. We who live in rainy climates can miss the point, but to someone in a desert with a raging thirst, what is more welcome than a source of cold, clear water?

The Word of God is our soul-refreshment. We find the Lord has given special means for dispensing it: the ordinances of worship, particularly preaching. Here, “with joy (we) draw water out of the wells of salvation” (Isaiah 12:3; cf. Ruth 2:9). The depth and fulness of these wells continually amaze us. As we go on in our pilgrimage, the Lord refreshes us with increasing discoveries of truth and grace, and they are “as cold waters to a thirsty soul” (Proverbs 25:25).

The Treachery

Applying the metaphor to our situation today, we have a picture of treachery: “The Philistines had stopped them after the death of Abraham”. These men had plugged the wells, the waters of life. No one could draw anything from them now; they were as useless as the dry, arid land itself. This was treacherous because it was done by those who should have respected Isaac’s wells. The Philistines had made a treaty with Abraham in his day (Genesis 21:22-32). Now they had gone back on it in his son’s time.

Today we face a similar situation concerning our “wells of salvation”. Over a hundred years ago, as Maurice Roberts has clearly outlined in the earlier article, a deadly rationalism came over to Great Britain from Germany. The catastrophic effects of this are with us now in the present state of things in the church and nation. The Higher Critical Movement took away the supernaturalism from Christianity. The God-breathed and inerrant Scriptures, Creation in six days, the miracles, the atonement, eternal punishment, the new birth, and other vital doctrines were all gradually re-defined to make Christianity appeal to the “more advanced and scientifically-aware people” of the soon-coming twentieth century.

These clever and subtle men – theological professors, church leaders, preachers – claimed to be improving the wells and making the water more palatable. What they really did was stop up the well-shafts with their arrogant presuppositions and unbelieving “scholarship”. It was a treachery of historic proportions. The Higher Critics claimed to be on the side of truth, but were secretly envious enemies like the Philistines. One of them, Professor

Marcus Dods, Principal of New College Edinburgh, wrote in 1902: "I wish I could live as a spectator through the next generation and see what they are going to make of things. There will be a grand turn-up in matters theological and the churches won't know themselves fifty years hence. It is hoped some little rag of faith may be left when all's done. For my own part I am sometimes entirely under water and see no sky at all."¹ What an admission! Many of these Liberals knew what they were doing, and some of them made shipwreck on the rocks of their own infidelity.²

Liberalism never gives anything; eventually it takes everything away. In its guise as intellectual superiority and "relevance" it is nothing other than religious unbelief and betrayal of the truth. The fruit of it could be heard a few years ago in a radio interview between the atheist Ludovic Kennedy and David Jenkins, the then bishop of Durham. "What about the next world?", asked Kennedy, "if there is no resurrection, what then?" "I cannot help you, I can only hope," replied the bishop. If leaders in the church are not able to expound God's Word, they are "wells without water" (2 Peter 2:17). The empty churches and chapel buildings of the United Kingdom are standing monuments to what the Higher Critics have done.

I want us to consider three other movements which may well be directly affected by the Higher Critical Movement: Ecumenism, New Evangelicalism, and the Charismatic Movement.

Ecumenism

The cry of ecumenism is: "Doctrine doesn't matter, so long as we have made 'a response to Jesus Christ'." Accordingly, it is suggested that we may have Christ and yet not be orthodox in belief, in spite of our Lord's demand: "If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed" (John 8:31). So the wells of truth do not matter. The main thing is that all "Christians" shake hands across the divide and our churches present a united front to the world, to make our "evangelism" credible. I remember in my first pastorate being invited by the Anglican vicar to the local minister's fraternal. I knew it comprised all denominations, Roman Catholic priests included, and when I declined and mentioned "the truth", he said to me in the words of Pilate: "What is truth?" This illustrates how Liberalism leads to ecumenism. This is why all lovers of the truth (2 Thessalonians 2:10) must stand apart from it. Real ecumenism will always exist among like-minded and Bible-believing Christian churches: "they continued stedfastly in the apostles' *doctrine and fellowship*" (Acts 2:42).

New Evangelicalism

This treachery is so subtle that many today are completely unaware of it. Its history reads almost like a conspiracy, and yet the motives of the men who launched it seemed honourable. In America after the Second World War certain influential Christians felt that something was seriously wrong with Fundamentalism.³ they believed that its apparent lack of biblical scholarship, and its separation from Liberals and from their social involvement, was a disadvantage. They were losing the battle for the hearts and minds of unbelievers. So they modified their evangelical thinking and founded Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. This institution aimed to gain academic prestige for conservative Christianity, thus winning respect from the liberals. It would also demonstrate that evangelicalism could be engaged in social action without compromising its message. Fundamentalism would no longer be seen as negative and separate. It sought to “plant the flag in the middle of the road” and be “in it to win it.”

The term “Neo-Evangelical” or “New Evangelical” was first coined in the 1940s by one of its prominent advocates, Harold J. Ockenga. Its early appearance on British soil was through the Billy Graham Crusades of the 1950s. Graham agreed with the changed stance of the New Evangelicals. He became one of the trustees of the Fuller Seminary, and was hailed by Ockenga as the spokesman for its convictions and ideals.⁴ The Graham Crusades established a new concept of evangelism. They took it away from the local church and made it the speciality of the big professionals. Pressure was applied to the sinner’s alleged free-will to get him to “decide for Christ”. Coming to the front was virtually equated with conversion. Instead of “salvation is of the LORD” it almost became “salvation is of the choir, evangelist and counsellor”. In fairness, the evangelist preached the saving aspects of the gospel with charm and power. He sincerely dispensed cups of living water from the wells. This is why God has sovereignly blessed and saved many at these Crusades. But positive results are no sign that God is pleased, or that there will not be a price to pay for disobedience (see Numbers 20:11,12 – where Moses’ disobedience brought Israel the water but brought him divine chastisement).

It became clear that New Evangelicals were prepared to tolerate, and work with, Liberals. Graham soon began to accept the sponsorship of church leaders notorious for their hostility to historic Christianity. The spectacle of

Dr. Graham preaching the gospel, flanked by those who hated it and denounced it at other times, is now well known, as is the practice of sending enquirers back to their Roman Catholic or Liberal “churches”. These Crusades, and the thinking behind them, have profoundly influenced evangelical Christianity for over forty years. Its philosophy of “doctrine divides, evangelism unites” has been espoused by many. Once clear-cut Evangelicals are now tolerant of Liberal views, even insisting that such leaders are “fellow-Christians” with whom we can “spread the gospel”. The “social implications of the gospel” figure wearisomely high on the agenda too – higher than in our Lord’s Commission (Matthew 28:19,20). Some⁵ who were once robust evangelicals have actually espoused Liberal unbelief in the form of capitulating to Annihilationism – the belief that not eternal torment in hell, but mere non-existence awaits unsaved sinners.

The old Evangelicalism of G. Campbell Morgan, Fred Mitchell and H.F. Steveson has all but gone, along with the journals that once were its voice, like *The Christian* and the *Life of Faith*. It has given way to a new and weaker strain of Evangelicalism that can trace its ancestry back to the Higher Critical Movement over a hundred years ago. Generations of New Evangelicals, their agencies and literature, have dominated the scene, so that lovers of the gospel and of gospel-obedience are pushed aside and dismissed as “troublers of Israel”.

New Evangelicalism is indifferent to the need of Evangelical Christians to separate from error and from worldliness. It is tolerant and accommodating (except of sticklers for truth and faithfulness). It courts the approval of Liberals and glances over its shoulder lest it be thought too strict or to be Fundamentalist!⁶ It tends to be self-confident and worldly-wise.⁷

However, neither in America nor in Britain has Neo-Evangelicalism led to the people coming back to Christianity, any more than the old Liberalism had done. Rather, the upsurge and spread of this Neo-Evangelical approach has coincided with a falling away from Christianity on a wide scale. Is not the decline of historic Christianity in the English-speaking world partly owing to the decline represented by the New Evangelicals? “Co-operation without compromise” has become co-operation *with* compromise; “In it to win it” has ended up to mean “in it to *lose* it”. In their fraternising with Liberals, New Evangelicals have given the enemy access to the wells.

The Charismatic Movement

This phenomenon burst upon the scene in the early 1960s and has divided and multiplied ever since. Its representatives declare: "We have sunk new wells! We have found fresher water! Our well-shafts tap the same rivers as those of the early church!" Many have believed these claims, and have drunk deeply, becoming heady with miracles and power. Yet, this movement is indifferent to precise, clear-cut doctrine. Orthodox belief as the touchstone has been supplanted by subjective experience. The greatest casualty has been the doctrine of Scripture. A few years ago a leading Charismatic, Michael Harper (founder of Fountain Trust in 1964), stated in an interview: "I believe God is more important than the Bible." Worse still, in another magazine, someone asked Gerald Coates, a Charismatic leader: "Do you believe the Scriptures are infallible?" He replied: "No, I don't. Now I know that people will go mad when I say that – because I don't believe in the inerrancy of Scripture. Actually it's a doctrine that cannot be proved..." Many Charismatics would not go as far as that, yet by their own claims to extra revelation through prophecy and tongues they are just as much in error. In practice they are guilty of *superseding* the Bible as the all-sufficient deposit of truth and rule of life. Cutting themselves loose from revealed truth, they opt for emotionalism and subjectivism.

The Holy Spirit whom Charismatics believe in is one who leads people otherwise than by the Word which He has inspired.⁸ There is an almost militant impatience shown to any who appeal to Scripture alone to "prove all things". In making the alleged baptism in the Spirit the focus of fellowship, a man's beliefs are not considered important so long as he shares in a "Holy Ghost experience", or the "Toronto Blessing". Apparently He is no longer "the Spirit of truth", because He is now claimed to indwell Roman Catholics (who add to God's Word, Proverbs 30:6) and Liberals (who take away from it, Revelation 22:19). Can we feel confident, as they do, that there are such people as Liberal Charismatics, Catholic Charismatics, Evangelical Charismatics, and Reformed Charismatics?

The Higher Critical Movement has had more far-reaching effects than many realise. In stopping up the wells of truth, it has provided the rationale for the Ecumenical Movement, is the patron of the New Evangelicalism, and has caused a vacuum which the Charismatic Movement claims to fill. Marcus Dods spoke of "fifty years hence". He would certainly be dismayed at what Liberalism and its three offshoots have done. How much earth and rubbish

have been tipped into the wells of truth! We truly need to “dig again the wells of water”.

We have seen that for over a hundred years “Philistine” enemies have been stopping up the wells of divine truth. The Higher Critical Movement, begun in Germany and brought over to Britain, was hailed by many as “necessary progress”. It was releasing the Church from the orthodox yet increasingly unpopular dogmas of historic Christianity. The fundamental doctrines of the faith (somewhat embarrassing now) could be dismantled and reassembled to suit the scientific and man-centred spirit that was abroad – with, people were assured, no loss of orthodoxy or piety.

Leading the way in this Higher Critical Movement were British theological professors, many of whom had done post-graduate work under the rationalistic teachers in German universities. From Wellhausen, Harnack and Ritschl such scholars brought rational views back to Britain and contaminated a rising generation of preachers and Christian leaders. This new approach to the things of God quickly spread. “Little children” and disciples under God’s Word turned into judges and critics of it. Bishop Colenso in South Africa, F.D. Maurice in England and William Robertson Smith in Scotland were just three of the many who compromised the Higher Critical, or Liberal, movement.

The spirit of the age not only demands changes but also creates the climate for those changes. Halfway through the last century the upheaval in popular thinking already abroad was given new impetus. In 1859 Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* and J.S. Mill’s *On Liberty* were published. These epoch-making books did much to increase the doubts which many had about revealed religion. Darwin’s theories showed that biblical truth (about Creation especially) was not fixed and final after all, but must be subject to new discoveries and development. Mill’s work showed the need to break free from old systems and traditions. These men – and there were others – could never have known how their ideas would produce a tidal wave of public attitudes that would both demand and create modification of divine truth.

The thinking now was that Genesis chapters 1-11 could be made elastic enough to accommodate the millions of years evolution required for the age of the earth. The orthodox doctrine of inerrancy gave way to “further investigation” and “honest doubt”. The New Testament was subjected to textual criticism, with preconceived notions about the text. As for the historicity of the Bible, rather than unfolding divine revelation, it was the

uncertain story of religion outgrowing its primitive ideas, with Christianity as its final refinement. The total depravity of man gave way to a belief in “man’s essential goodness”, leading to a wrong doctrine of salvation. No wonder, then, that the atonement, the new birth, everlasting punishment, and everything else, took on a new look to prepare for the “Golden Age” of the twentieth century.

Many Victorian Christians failed to see what was happening. Some, however, did but their warnings were far from appreciated. C.H. Spurgeon was the standard-bearer amongst the Non-conformists. Writing in *The Sword and Trowel* for September 1887 he brought into focus issues that would become known as the Downgrade Controversy: “A chasm is opening between the men who believe the Bible and the men who are prepared for an advance upon Scripture... Inspiration and speculation cannot long abide in peace. Compromise there can be none. We cannot hold the inspiration of the Word and yet reject it; we cannot believe in the atonement and deny it; we cannot hold the doctrine of the fall and yet talk of the evolution of spiritual life;... we cannot recognise the punishment of the impenitent and yet indulge the ‘larger hope’. One way or other we must go. Decision is the virtue of the hour.”

Despite this brave stand by Spurgeon and others, Liberalism took over the major theological colleges and church denominations, and the succeeding blighted years of the twentieth century indict it as clearly as anything can. Not content with this massive falling away from the Christian faith, however, off-shoots of Liberalism have been stopping up the wells: Ecumenism, New Evangelicalism, and the Charismatic Movement. Only divine truth is permanent and final (Psalm 119:89) – error and delusion go on mutating and multiplying endlessly. So today our fight is on several fronts at once.

The Recovery

We read that “Isaac digged again the wells of water, which they had digged in the days of Abraham his father... and he called their names after the names by which his father had called them” (Genesis 26:18). In opening up his father’s wells, Isaac identified himself with Abraham’s rightful claim to them, and secured their availability for the future. This is our task regarding the non-negotiable Bible. We must lay claim to the great verities which our forefathers held dear, and secure the precious deposit for future generations. We have to remove the rubbish, bring up the pure water of truth again, and

guard it for the time to come. What will this mean in practice? First there are some urgent needs we must consider.⁹

1) *We must keep a strict and careful watch over ourselves.*

In times like these, it is all too easy to become unsettled and lose our firm adherence to the truth, “lest ye also being led away with the error of the wicked, fall from your own stedfastness”; “Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall” (2 Peter 3:17; 1 Corinthians 10:12).

2) *We must make prayer a priority.*

The psalmist asks: “If the foundations (the fundamental principles of truth and righteousness) be destroyed, what can the righteous do?” (Psalm 11:3). In the next verse he answers his own question: “The LORD is in his holy temple” (verse 4). He means that God is in His heaven, His throne is accessible: let the people go to Him in prayer. The more evil the times, the more prayerful God’s people should be (Psalm 119:126,127; Ezekiel 9:4; Micah 7:5-7).

3) *We must study the Word of God*

There is nothing so strengthening as the reading and hearing of the truth, “confirming the souls of the disciples” (Acts 14:22). If the Christian would be strong – strong to resist the encroachments of error, disorder and confusion – the Christian must study God’s truth until he has a real personal conviction that it is true indeed. And he should give special attention to the truth currently being taught, particularly if it is an opposed and disputed truth: “Be established in the present truth” (2 Peter 1:12).

4) *If we find ourselves in spiritual and ecclesiastical association with those who countenance the evils we deplore, then we have no alternative but to separate from them.*

This is clearly taught: “have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness”; “mark them – avoid them” (Ephesians 5:11; Romans 16:17). This may mean refusing to attend upon an unsound ministry (Proverbs 19:27; John 10:4,5; 1 Timothy 6:5), or it may mean avoiding fellowship with false or unsound “Christians” (Exodus 23:2; Isaiah 8:11,12; 2 Timothy 2:20,21). Whichever it is, we have no mandate to remain where unscriptural doctrines and practices are tolerated. We should take the utmost care regularly to attend a place of worship where there is both faithful preaching and pure worship.

- 5) *It is required of us that we forthrightly declare the truth, protesting at the same time against all false teaching and wrong behaviour.*

Christ said: "Ye shall be witnesses unto me" (Acts 1:8), and therefore, like Paul, we should be bold and vocal "in the defence and confirmation of the gospel" (Philippians 1:7 cf 1:27; 1 Timothy 6:12; Jude 3).

- 6) *On the other hand, a danger to be avoided is extremism.*

Let us note the warnings of Scripture on this: "Be not righteous over much; neither make thyself over wise" (Ecclesiastes 7:16). The widespread prevalence of religious error incites some to such zeal that they go "above (or beyond) that which is written" becoming "wise in their own conceits" (1 Corinthians 4:6; Romans 11:25). Singular now in doctrine, and over-scrupulous in practice, they begin to despise all who do not see things as they do. Eventually, after ostracising many faithful people, they end up all alone, the victims of their own sinful pride.

- 7) *There is need to seek the presence and assistance of the Holy Spirit.*

Not by human power but by the supply of the Spirit of God, the Church is revived and made both to prosper and triumph (Zechariah 4:6; Haggai 2:4,5). If ever there was a day when we needed the Holy Spirit's grace and energy, it is today. Our prayer continually should be: "Wilt thou not revive us again: that thy people may rejoice in thee?" (Psalm 85:6). Remember, it was when the disciples were helpless and depressed that the Lord Jesus breathed on them and said: "Receive ye the Holy Ghost" (John 20:22 cf verse 19).

- 8) *However desperate the situation may be, our hope must be in God, that He will yet intervene and restore His cause.*

The temptation to sink into despondency and to become pessimists should be firmly resisted. It is no part of our vocation to sit in some corner with our head in our hands, waiting for the darkness to deepen. God lives! And as long as God lives in His heaven, hope should live in our hearts (Romans 12:12). "Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost" (Romans 15:13).

- 9) *Acknowledging God's eternal purpose, we should see how great an opportunity is presented to us.*

"Who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:14 cf Acts 13:36). It is true that the enemy

has stopped up the wells, but it is also true that God has chosen us, trained us, equipped us and charged us to reopen those wells. Let us, in His strength, see that the time for faithfulness is now, and act. Let history's verdict be that in a day when multitudes proved false, some remained true and played their full part to the end.

Allegiance to the truth

Our reopening the wells of truth must be a thorough and complete work. This will mean going right down through the earth and rubbish back to the pure waters of truth taught by our Lord, His apostles, the Reformers, Puritans, Whitefield and Edwards, Spurgeon and D.M. Lloyd-Jones, to the truths referred to as "Calvinism".

These essentials of historic Christianity are easily remembered by the acrostic TULIP.¹⁰ They put *everything* under the throne of God – because Scripture does – and declare God to be sovereign in creation, providence *and in the provision and application of redemption*. This latter – the *application* of redemption – is the nub of the issue. If the question is asked: "What lies behind sinners coming to Christ for salvation?" Arminians (who deny that men's salvation is absolutely at God's disposal) answer: "The exercise of their free-will when they decide to accept Christ." Calvinists answer: "The sovereign and distinguishing grace of God, choosing these sinners in eternity past, redeeming them in Christ, and bringing them effectually to Him through the gospel." The one is man-centred, the other God-centred.

Calvinism (otherwise called reformed theology, the doctrines of grace) reflects the teaching of the Bible when it insists that mankind is *so fallen* in Adam that God has to *do all* for the salvation of sinners. And that He has done so by means of a gracious Covenant with His Son on behalf of a people. Before Creation and the Fall, this "everlasting covenant, ordered in all things and sure" secures eternal life and countless blessings for the elect through the finished work of Christ their Surety (see 2 Samuel 23:5; John 17:2,4,24). Thus, these doctrines are rooted in the Covenant of Grace, as the Shorter Catechism puts it: "God, having out of His mere good pleasure, from all eternity, elected some to everlasting life, did enter into a covenant of grace, to deliver them out of the estate of sin and misery, and to bring them into an estate of salvation by a Redeemer."

Charles Hodge, the last century American theologian, once wrote: "All true doctrine tends to humble man and exalt God." By this standard, these doctrines of grace present us with "so great salvation". They set God on His throne and man at His footstool. They take away every possibility of boasting from the creature and give all the glory to God our Saviour (1 Corinthians 1:29-31; Ephesians 1:6; 2:7-10). Because it is salvation viewed from a thoroughly biblical perspective, the belief and preaching of these truths will ever be the fountain of true godliness (Titus 1:1). No less than the recovery of this system of truth is to reach down to the well-waters of life again.

There must, then, be allegiance to *this* gospel if we are to have the wells open again. Let us be decided and steadfast over this. It is evident when a preacher is Reformed: there is doctrinal backbone in his ministry, an experimental acquaintance with real religion, a holy sobriety about his life, an unflinching trust in the God of all grace, and a zeal for the glory of the triune Jehovah beyond all else. These features will ever mark the lives of preachers and hearers who "know the grace of God in truth" (Colossians 1:6).

No moderate Calvinism

Nowadays there is a tendency to smooth the ruggedness of these truths. Some men, having come to see them in Scripture, have found that "all the counsel of God" is not shared by all Christians, or "has not worked" in their church situation, so they have moderated their convictions. There can, however, be no moderate or diluted Calvinism any more than moderate or diluted Christianity. It is not for us, upon unblocking the wells, to modify the water God has given. Gradually altering the content and emphasis of truth is what the New Evangelicals have done; we want no "New Calvinists". Spurgeon was aghast at the thought: "The old truth that Calvin preached, that Augustine preached, and Paul preached, is the truth that I must preach today, or else be false to my conscience and to my God. I cannot shape the truth; I know of no such thing as paring off the rough edges of a doctrine. John Knox's gospel is my gospel. That which thundered through Scotland must thunder through England again."¹¹

Our Lord, and those sent by Him, taught explicitly the distinctive truths which we call Calvinistic and which are being played down today: *Total Depravity* (John 3:19,27; 6:44,45); *Unconditional Election* (John 10:26; 17:2; Ephesians

1:4); *Limited Atonement* (John 10:11; Ephesians 5:25); *Irresistible Grace* (John 10:16; 1 Corinthians 1:9); *Perseverance of the Saints* (John 10:27,28; 1 Peter 1:5). If these truths are the undoubted teaching of holy Scripture, who are we to give an uncertain sound to them? We should not be afraid to give them their Scripture-coined and historic names, just as Isaac, when referring to the wells, “called their names after the names by which his father had called them.”¹²

Moderate Calvinism to blame

A case can be made from history to show that the Higher Critical Movement and its three offshoots came about because of the weakening of allegiance to Reformation doctrine. Until around the middle of last century the prevailing doctrinal conviction was grounded upon the God-glorifying tenets of Scripture which we call Calvinistic. Apart from some exceptions, all the churches’ confessions and doctrinal articles reflected this. This is the theology of the 39 Articles of the Church of England, the Westminster Confession, the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith, the 1658 Savoy Declaration of the Independents, the 1823 Confession of Faith of the Presbyterian Church of Wales and others. However, by the time of Darwin and Mill a change was noticeable.

R.W. Dale in his *History of English Congregationalism* comments on the theological trend amongst the early nineteenth century Nonconformists: “The doctrines of Election, and a limited Atonement, were mentioned very occasionally, or dropped altogether. They were not denied – they might be true – but ... there was no need to say anything about them. Independents began to describe themselves as ‘Moderate Calvinists’. They thought that while preserving the strong foundations of the Calvinistic theology and its method, they could modify some of the Calvinistic doctrines, which in their rigid form had become incredible to them. But they were attempting an impossible task... They had not learned that theologians who begin with Calvin must end with Calvin. ‘Moderate Calvinism’ was Calvinism in decay. The old Calvinistic phrases, the old Calvinistic traditions, were still on the lips of the Independents when George III died; but in the spirit and tendency of their theology they were Calvinistic no longer.” Iain Murray, quoting Dale in a magazine article, then goes on to state: “The results of this doctrinal weakening, characteristic of so many 19th century English evangelicals, were

devastating. In the Church of England it removed the most effective barrier to the spread of Tractarianism and in Nonconformity it prepared the way for Higher Criticism. The collapse of Calvinism was not just the collapse of a time-worn system, it was nothing less than the collapse of all doctrinal Christianity.”¹³

This analysis is all too correct. A weakened Calvinism became a weak evangelicalism which was not sufficient to resist the Higher Critical onslaught; and in this century it has been found wanting before the combined might of Ecumenism, New Evangelicalism and the Charismatic Movement. The *only* thing that can put these evils to flight is the force of God’s truth summarised in The Five Points. It is significant that Spurgeon (a Calvinist) led the fight against the Liberal downgrade in his day. If only an army of like-minded men had joined him! But the Calvinists (who in the main were the only ones who could discern the times and were prepared to fight) were too few. The Arminianism of Victorian Nonconformists (including household names like Alexander Maclaren, F.B. Meyer and Joseph Parker) neither discerned the danger nor fought the enemy. If we do not heed the warnings of this history we are destined to repeat it.

How many professing Calvinists reading these lines stand where they stood (say) 10 or 20 years ago? We are either adding to the decline of historic Calvinism and all that goes with it, or we are helping its recovery. If the decline of it let the enemy block the wells, then let us ensure we dig them again and drive the Philistines from the field.

Pioneers and consolidators

In the church’s long history, some have been raised up to be like Abraham – pioneers who have sunk wells. Others are called to be like Isaac – those who reopen the wells of truth. In the first category come our forefathers who gave us the wells of truth: the Reformers who dug them in a time when Rome had buried the gospel; the Puritans, too, who dispensed those waters so experimentally and pastorally; and Whitefield whose zeal under God set Britain and America aflame with the gospel. Among these must rank Dr. Lloyd-Jones, who “taught a whole generation of Christian Union students to love doctrine and to be bold in declaring it.”¹⁴

Others, however, come afterwards and must recover and consolidate what has been lost. This is where we come in. To us is committed the great responsibility of reopening, guarding and defending these wells. There will always be those keen to block them up again. Pure, divine truth is offensive and unpalatable to worldly and religious enemies alike. We must keep them open, dispense the waters, boldly declare these mighty and God-blessed verities; this is needed more than ever today if things are not to grow yet worse. And if it should please God to arise and breathe new life and power into the church, revival will come upon a people doing what is most likely to receive it, for revivals are usually characterised by the centrality of the Word.

Our own lives

In all our recovery of truth, we must ensure that we are personally subject to the Bible in everything. The end of it all is to bring us to God. It is possible to be so busy *for* the Lord that we are not busy *with* the Lord. Mere contending can be a dry and barren thing. To be so taken up with reopening the wells that we are not drinking deeply out of them ourselves is mere carnal activity. If we are more thrilled when error is denounced than when the gospel is preached, there is something wrong. We must have a *felt* acquaintance with the truth.

The ultimate test is when we come to die. What will be a soft pillow for our head then? What will be the basis for a calm assurance when we can no longer preach or serve? Not the fact that we have been fruitful, for we are unprofitable servants. Rather, the truth that saves and quickens even to the end. It has been expressed no better than a great apologist J. Gresham Machen at his end in 1937. Speaking particularly of our Lord's obedience to God's law to give us a perfect righteousness, he declared: "Isn't the Reformed Faith grand?... I'm so thankful for the active obedience of Christ. No hope without it."

If we have reopened some of these wells, or helped to keep them open – and have lived upon the water – our lives and ministries will not have been in vain.

¹ *Later letters of Marcus Dods*, 1911, page 67. Quoted by Iain Murray in *The Bible Under Attack*, Evangelical Press, 1978, page 64.

² A.B. Bruce, professor of Apologetics and New Testament Exegesis in the Free Church of Scotland Glasgow College, is known for his popular book *The Training of the Twelve* (1871 and modern re-prints). It is not well known that he was a leading Liberal of the time and did much to promote the new destructive criticism that was spreading through the Free church. When his end came in 1899, one of his closest friends commented sorrowfully: "Sandy Bruce died without a single Christian conviction." (See *How Liberal Theology infected Scotland* by R.A. Finlayson in *Banner of Truth* magazine, issue 156).

³ This term came to represent the sturdy evangelicalism of the day. It was coined from *The Fundamentals*, a series of small books published from 1909 to re-state orthodox belief against the liberalism that was creeping through America at an alarming rate.

⁴ For the history of Fuller Theological Seminary and the New Evangelicalism, see *Reforming Fundamentalism* by George M. Marsden, Eerdmans, 1987.

⁵ Notable among these is the much-respected Anglican Dr. John Stott. In a book entitled *Essentials*, (Hodder & Stoughton, 1988), cast in the form of a dialogue with a Liberal, Stott expresses his preference for Annihilationism. Since then the Anglican church has officially declared itself in favour of Annihilationism. In 1992 Dr. Stott's book *The Contemporary Christian* was published (IVP). It contains a plea for "double listening" – that we should listen to both the Word and the world. This is reminiscent of the early New Evangelicalism, yet it was declared Book of the Year by the British Christian Booksellers Convention.

⁶ In their publishing this sometimes surfaces revealingly. The *Evangelical Magazine of Wales* reviewed IVP's *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* when it was published a few years ago. The reviewer noted with concern very weak statements about the physical resurrection of Christ and the nature of eternal punishment. The former is put so that it will not alienate Liberal intelligentsia: "While belief in Jesus' resurrection does not necessarily hinge on the historicity of the empty tomb story, a variety of historical considerations make the latter plausible (page 558)." Apparently the apostles had no such scholarly reticence: "This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we are witnesses" (Acts 3:32)! Interestingly, IVP was voted Publisher of the Year by the BCBC mentioned earlier.

⁷ I came across a sad example recently in the form of Scripture Union's *One Up* daily Bible reading notes for young people. The extent of their conformity to the world is amazing. The long-haired youth on the front cover, behind such titles as "Luke gives us the lowdown on God" and "Spooky but true? Jonah and the whale" did not promise much that was spiritual or serious. Inside there is a cartoon entitled "Cyberkids", colour photographs and vivid illustrations, and expressions such as "So why does Jesus go ga ga about babies and children?" and "Poor Jesus!" While we acknowledge that Bible reading notes for younger people should be interesting and relevant, this capitulation to the spirit of the age is lamentable and likely to produce anything but godliness and growth in grace. Thirty years ago I remember using SU's *Daily Bread* Bible reading notes as a teenager – what a world away from its modern equivalent! But then, New Evangelicalism had not made the strides it has made today. How many other Christian organisations are hardly recognisable today compared with what they once were, and for the same reason. The downgrade is deplorable.

⁸ How gladdened we were by the testimony of the Christian triple jumper Jonathan Edwards, who in 1987 hit the headlines when he refused to participate in the world championships because it would have meant jumping on the Lord's day. But now all is changed. *Christians in Sport* have stated that Mr. Edwards has "softened his strict sabbatarian beliefs" after interpreting a friend's dream as a message from God. Now, he says, "God is calling me to serve Him by competing on Sunday" (see Isaiah 8:20).

⁹ For the following nine points in this section, I am indebted to a magazine article by Malcolm H. Watts.

¹⁰

Total Depravity

Unconditional Election

Limited Atonement

Irresistible Grace

Perseverance of the saints

On the above, Spurgeon once wrote: "We believer in the five great points commonly known as Calvinistic; but we do not regard these five points as being barbed shafts which we are to thrust between the ribs of our fellow-Christians. We look upon them as being five great lamps which help irradiate the cross; or, rather, five bright emanations springing from the glorious covenant of our Triune God and illustrating the great doctrine of Jesus crucified."

¹¹ C.H. Spurgeon's *Autobiography*, volume 1, page 167. In the Banner of Truth abridgement *The Early Years*, page 162.

¹² Preaching in 1857, Spurgeon warned ministers: "Some of you have never preached upon election since you were ordained. The peculiarities of 'the five points' are concealed. These things, you say, are offensive. And so, gentlemen, you would rather offend God than you would offend man... But you say 'It will be dangerous'. What! God's truth dangerous? I should not like to stand in your shoes when you have to face your Maker on the day of judgment after such an utterance as that. If it be not God's truth, let it alone; but if you believe the thing, out with it. Keep back nothing; tell the whole gospel out. Tell out man's responsibility: do not stutter at it. Tell out divine sovereignty: do not refuse to talk of election; use the word, even if they sneer..."

¹³ The *Banner of Truth* magazine, April 1959 (issue 15). An article entitled *A Hundred Years Ago*, part II. The whole of this article makes illuminating reading, and the author's conclusions are even more valid today.

¹⁴ See *D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones: The Flight of Faith, 1939-1981*. Iain H. Murray, Banner of Truth, 1990.