THE OXFORD GROUP MOVEMENT

IS IT OF GOD OR IS IT AN ANGLO-CATHOLIC MOVEMENT?

Address by
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“If any man shall say unto you, Lo, here is Christ, or there; believe it not. For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect.”


The great prophecies contained in the Olivet Discourse were uttered by our Lord just prior to His crucifixion on Calvary. As He sat on the Mount of Olives, where in the future His feet shall stand in the day of His manifestation, He prophesied the destruction of the magnificent temple building, and His disciples questioned Him, saying, “Tell us when shall these things be? And what shall be the sign of thy coming and of the end of the age?”

In answer to that question, our Lord cast His all-seeing eye down the age toward its close and pointed out to His people certain unmistakable signs by which they might know when the age was drawing to a close. As He looked into the future, He saw kingdom rising against kingdom, and nation against nation. He heard the sound of war and rumors of war. He saw pestilence and earthquake, Bolshevism, Communism, anarchy, lawlessness. He saw a time of trouble, the like of which has not yet been known, a time which He called “the great tribulation.” He spoke plainly of these things, for the instruction of believers in every age.

Among other things, the Lord warned His disciples of the religious condition that would prevail in the end time. “False Christs, and false prophets, shall arise,” He declared. So great will be the delusions at that time that “if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect.” The inspired writers of the Epistles, Paul, Peter, and James, echo the same note of warning. To Timothy was written, “In the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils.” (1 Tim. 4:1). Peter warns against false prophets who
shall "deny the Lord that bought them." (2 Pet. 2:1). Jude urges that we "contend earnestly for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints." John adds a word of exhortation, as well as of warning, that we "try the spirits whether they are of God; because many false prophets are gone out into the world." (1 John 4:1).

In view of these and other Scriptures, no pastor should be charged with a lack of charity who examines the theological position of those who come to be the teachers and the guides of the church of Jesus Christ. There was never a day when it was so important to require leaders to furnish their credentials as it is today.

The Church of the Open Door was organized about nineteen years ago. Its first pastor was Dr. R. A. Torrey, of blessed memory. Through all the years, this church has taken an uncompromising stand for "the faith which was once delivered unto the saints." In view of this, it is not to be wondered at that in the present hour, many people should turn to this church, seeking light and guidance in regard to the movement that bears the name, "The Oxford Movement." In answer to these queries and many others on the same subject, after a study of the theological position of this Movement, in the light of the Word of God, we pass on the following impressions.

God has given us a standard by which we may measure the Scriptural position of movements and men. "To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them." (Isa. 8:20). The way to put any Movement to the test and discover its worth or worthlessness is to bring it under the lens of Holy Writ. In the Church of the Open Door, we believe that the Bible is the Word of God; that it is the supreme authority, and the only court of appeal. We shall not examine the Oxford Movement or any other movement in the light of our interpretations of the Bible, but rather in the light of those principles that all evangelical Christians throughout the ages have recognized as fundamental to saving faith. These principles are four in number:

First, the Eternal Deity of the Lord Jesus Christ. (John 1:1-3. Micah 5:2). Jesus Christ is co-equal, and co-eternal with God. His humanity was perfect, as was also His Deity. He is the second member of the Trinity.

Second, the Atoning Nature of the Death of Jesus Christ. If there is one thing in the Word of God that is emphasized above everything else, it is that the blood of
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be. In this congregation there are many men who at one time were drunkards, thieves, morphine addicts; but God has marvelously delivered them. Talk about lives transformed! Come any Wednesday night and hear their testimonies. There are also men and women who have never committed the particular sins mentioned, but they came to realize that they, too, needed to be born again, and have been delivered from their self-righteousness through faith in Christ as Redeemer, Lord, and Coming King.

The Oxford Group also believes that the most important thing in a man’s life is his responsibility to Almighty God. This, likewise, is a truth which evangelicals have believed and emphasized. Daniel Webster was once asked what was the greatest question that ever entertained his mind. He replied, “My accountability to God.” The doctrine of accountability is clearly taught in the Word of God, and it needs to be emphasized by the modern church, for there has been a great drifting away from it in recent years. In the eyes of multitudes of people, even in this so-called Christian land, there is no fear of God at all.

The Atonement

When all this has been said, there still remain some serious criticisms to be made in regard to the Oxford Movement—criticisms that have been re-echoed in this and other lands where the Group has worked. First among these is the fact that in the public utterances of their leaders no place is given to the atoning work of Christ and other vital doctrines of the Christian faith.

The great and central theme of the Bible is the redemptive work of Christ accomplished through the “blood of his cross” (Col. 1:20.) It is the theme of every book in the Bible and the subject of the song of the ransomed in Glory. (Rev. 1:5.)

All the great movements of this age, beginning at Pentecost, which have brought lasting blessing to men and glory to God have had this as their central theme. For instance, Peter on the day of Pentecost stood up and preached the Gospel of a crucified, risen Christ, proving that Jesus Christ in His death and resurrection fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies; and the Holy Ghost swept through that audience and gathered a multitude into heaven’s garner.
From the time that Saul of Tarsas met the Lord on the way to Damascus until the hour of his death, his theme was “Christ and him crucified.” The same is true of the Reformers, Luther, John Huss, Wyckliffe, and of the great soul-winners since their day, Wesley, Whitefield, Moody, Torrey, Chapman. All these men made the Word of God fundamental in their preaching and gave no uncertain note as to where they stood in regard to the atoning nature of the death of Christ.

As for the Oxford Movement, we have listened in vain for any of the fundamental themes to be emphasized. Not once did we hear stated in any of the public utterances of the leaders of the Movement that a man’s relationship to God depends upon his acceptance of Christ who died a vicarious death in the sinner’s place. This is one criticism that has come from all parts of the world where the Group has been.

Some of the language used in their book, For Sinners Only, has a modernistic and Unitarian flavor. Take, for instance, the statement on page 117 which reads, “These five hundred or so, drawn from all churches and no churches, do not stand for a point of view as the price of a safe seat in Paradise, but for a quality of life.”

This is not Biblical language. What a contrast to the declaration in Revelation 7:14-15: “These are they which came out of great tribulation and have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore are they before the throne of God.”

Doubtless there are men connected with the Movement who do believe in the atoning work of Christ; but a system cannot be judged by the beliefs held by individual members, but rather by the public utterances of its leaders. While some of the Oxford Group doubtless trust in the atoning work of Christ as their only hope of salvation, there are others that do not have the remotest idea of God’s redemptive plan.

If any one should accuse me of not believing in the atoning work of Christ, I would not allow a day to go by without making myself very clear on the subject, and I would do this publicly as well as privately. The Group leaders have had opportunity to do this, but they have not availed themselves of it.

Should the Movement be sound in regard to the atoning work of Christ, it is strange that one of its members should defend the theological position of Dr. Harry Emer-
son Fosdick of New York City. If the theological position of the Oxford Movement regarding the atoning work of Christ is the same as that held by Dr. Fosdick, then the critics of the Movement are justified in their contention that the Movement conceives of a salvation without blood.

The founder of a well-known faith mission says that he read the book, For Sinners Only, through twice and did not find one reference to Jesus Christ as a Redeemer. I verified this when I, too, read the book. How do you account for the omission?

I am glad we sang as our opening hymn this morning:

“There is a Fountain filled with blood,  
Drawn from Immanuel’s veins;  
And sinners, plunged beneath that flood,  
Lose all their guilty stains.

E’er since by faith I saw the stream  
Thy flowing wounds supply,  
Redeeming love has been my theme,  
And shall be till I die.”

No hymn has been more fiercely assailed than this one. Sir Edward Arnold, the author of The Light of Asia, said it was “shocking to his mind.” It has been attacked from all sides. Yet I would rather have written it than to have been the author of all the books that came from the pen of the Arnolds. It has transformed thousands of lives, has given rest to many hearts as they approached the “Valley of the Shadow,” and it contains more real gospel than is found in the whole volume, For Sinners Only.

The Nature of Sin

We also take issue with the Oxford Group on the doctrine of sin as taught in For Sinners Only. Only the fringe of the doctrine of sin as taught in the Bible is touched. After reading the chapter, “What is Sin?” I readily understood why Christ is not mentioned as a Redeemer. The sin referred to in this chapter does not need blood to wash it away or a vicarious death to expiate it. Sin, as here shown, is just a misfortune that can be corrected, the correction to be made on the sinner’s part. On page 269, sin is defined as being whatever keeps a man from God and from other people. On pages 269 to 275,
sin is further defined as being whatever is contrary to absolute honesty, absolute truth, absolute purity, absolute unselfishness. True, this is sin, but sin is a thousand times more than these things.

Some time ago, I was preaching in an Iowa penitentiary and became interested in a man. I determined to have him paroled to me. He told me his story, but alas, it was true only as far as it went. When I wrote to the Governor of the State of Iowa in regard to this man, I got his full record, and I concluded that the penitentiary was a safe place for him. What he had told me was the truth, but it was not the whole truth.

The full record of sin is found in the Bible—the record of what it is, and what it does, and what the eternal consequences are. The chapter, "What is sin?" does not deal with these things. There is not a suggestion there that sin will eternally separate a man from God. There is no intimation given that it has outraged the righteousness of God, and that one day the justice of God will deal with it and with the sinner, unless a man is separated from it and it from him through the death of Christ. Men have lost their sense of sin today because they have lost the vision of a holy God. Sin, as defined in For Sinners Only, would be perfectly acceptable to modernists, Unitarians, and ethical preachers.

The Introduction of the Confessional

The third criticism we make is that the Oxford Group attempts to introduce into the Protestant Church the confessional. It is a well-known fact, and admitted by even many Roman Catholic adherents, that the confessional is and always has been an abomination. The establishment of a laymen's confessional will not prove any better than that of the Roman Church. The Group bases its belief in a confessional upon James 5:16 which reads, "Confess your faults one to another." That verse is to be interpreted in the light of Matthew 5:23, 24: "If thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift."

Another verse which they emphasize is 1 John 1:9: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive
us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” If that verse refers to a confession to man, then all through the centuries, the Roman Catholic Church has been right and the Protestant Church has been wrong. It does not take any spiritual insight to see that the confession referred to is to be made to our great High Priest, our Advocate, and “He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

The Bible teaches that confession should be made. Confession should be made first of all to God. Read carefully Psalm 51, “Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight.” We are also exhorted to confess to one another, if we have wronged a brother and are able to rectify it. Confession and restitution should be made. When Zacchaeus met the Lord, he said, “Half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have taken any thing from any man by false accusation, I restore him fourfold.” It is every man’s responsibility to do this; but as for men confessing in a general way, rehearsing the details of their sins and “sharing” them, we find no such command in God’s Word. In fact, we find a command distinctly forbidding it in Ephesians 5:3,11,12:

“But fornications, and all uncleanness, or covetousness, let it not be once named among you, as becometh saints. . . . And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them. For it is a shame even to speak of those things which are done of them in secret.”

It is my opinion that the Oxford Movement is a subtle attempt to break down that seemingly unsurmountable barrier between Romanism and the Protestant Church. Through the centuries, the Order of the Jesuits have realized that the objection of protestantism to the confessional and its evils must be overcome if there is ever to be a united Christendom under the head of the Roman Catholic Church. The Anglo-Catholics in England are very active in endeavoring to introduce prayers for the dead into the prayer book, and the confessional into the church. Many Anglo-Catholics in days gone by have proved to be Jesuits. To say the least, it is a very significant thing that the Anglo-Catholics find a great appeal in the Oxford Movement. To my mind, it is just another step in the progress of the Evil One to bring about that great religious confederacy, “The Great Whore,” that is described in Revelation 17 and 18. In For Sinners Only, page 1, we read, “It (the Oxford Movement) may speed
up the reunion of Christendom, even Catholic and Prot­
tant.” Christians, think this statement through; it is very
significant.

During my conversation with members of the Oxford
Group, one of the leaders of the Movement asked, “How
do you account for the changed lives? Does not that bear
witness to the fact that the Movement is of God, for only
God changes lives for the better?”

I answered him, “No, my friend, I would have to talk
with these men whose lives have been changed before I
could come to any conclusion in regard to who brought
about the change.”

I then quoted 2 Cor. 11:13-15; “For such are false
apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into
the apostles of Christ. And no marvel; for Satan himself
is transformed into an angel of light. Therefore it is no
great thing if his ministers also be transformed as the
ministers of righteousness; whose end shall be according
to their works.”

The ministers of Satan are “ministers of righteousness”—not ministers of unrighteousness. What is Satan’s
plan and purpose? It is to give a man everything that God
will give him—apart from Christ. Does God offer right­
eousness? Satan offers one, too. God’s righteousness is
given on the basis of the redemptive work of Christ. Sa­
tan offers a righteousness apart from this redemptive
work.

I told the leader in the Oxford Group about a man
who had been marvelously changed through the accept­
ance of Christian Science. To this he replied, “Well, you
can thank God for that, can you not?”

I said, “Thank God for what? For a change through
Christian Science?”

The leader gave me to understand that the change
through Christian Science was a step Godward; but if I
understand my Bible, it was a step towards paganism. A
man who is changed or who receives any kind of benefit
from a system like Christian Science is always harder to
reach with the gospel than he was before the change took
place. I pointed out that all false cults that are now
flourishing—growing because the great multitudes are
untaught in the fundamental principles of saving faith—
such as Theosophy, New Thought, Bahaism, Ethicalism,
and Unitarism, all teach righteousness; “be kind, be
sweet, be good, pay your debts, be a good father, a good mother, a good citizen," etc. But there is in them no demand for an inward change, (the new creation mentioned in 2 Cor. 5:17), no requirement for faith in the Christ who died for our sins and rose again for our justification. I do not care what a system does for a man, or to what degree it may change him, if that system denies the fundamental principles of saving faith, or if it ignores them, or remains passive and gives no place to them in the public utterances of its leaders; that system is not of God.

In a word, to my mind, the Oxford Movement is a bundle of "wheat and tares," made up of men who believe the fundamentals of faith and those who do not know what it is all about, and they are able to get along as well as they seemingly do because there is no doctrinal basis on which the Movement is based.

The Twentieth Century does not need a new message. It needs the message of Peter, Paul, John Knox, Moody, Chapman, preached with a passion and in the power of the Holy Ghost.

True, many so-called fundamental churches are dead, but no new message will revive them. There can be no new message. The Apostle Paul has pronounced an anathema upon any, though he be an angel from heaven, who attempts to preach "another gospel." The need of the human heart has not been changed one whit by education, civilization, or ecclesiastical refinement. What we need, what we have always needed, and will need until the coming of the Lord Himself is a message which gives to Christ and His cross the central and paramount position, which views sin as God views it as exceedingly sinful, and which accepts the Word of God as the infallible rule of faith and practice. Such a message is the gospel of the grace of God, and when preached in the power of the Holy Ghost, it opens the gates of heaven to men and women, dead in trespasses and sin. What new message can do as much?

NOTE: This message was given by Rev. Louis T. Talbot at the morning service of the Church of the Open Door, Los Angeles, Sunday, February 26, 1933, to an audience of over three thousand people. Copies of this address can be secured at the Biola Book Room, 558 S. Hope Street, Los Angeles, Calif.

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