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Establishment and Liberty in the Church of England

BY GEORGE GOYDER

THE Church of England is established not only through its link with the State, but also because it is in a position to minister to every soul in the land through its several thousand parish Churches and full-time officers. It has, in addition, an established form of worship, established rules for its corporate life known as canons, and an established government by Convocations and Church Assembly. If we seek to maintain this machinery in face of the decline of church-going it is because we believe in the Church of England as a national institution, the existence of which makes it possible still to speak of England as a Christian country. Millions who rarely go to church in these days of competing attractions, available at the turning of a switch, yet continue to value and to identify themselves with the Church of England as the church of the nation. If they could only *visualize* the Church as a fellowship of Christian men and women joined in the worship of our Lord Jesus Christ and in service of one another, John or Mary, the ordinary lay person, might find it easier to come to church and belong to the fellowship or congregation of the faithful, which is what the Church in essence is. Hence the urgency of church reform, to bring home to ordinary people the nature of that unique fellowship.

The present system of church government is unfortunately not such a fellowship. It is divided between Convocations, Church Assembly, and Parliament. Authority is lost by such division. None of these bodies can speak with real authority for the Church of England today. The Convocations contain no laymen and as a result they are little more than a superior form of debating society for the clergy. From primitive times it has been a rule of the Church that its acts require the co-operation of the congregation in order to convey the authority of the Church. Lacking such co-operation, the acts of Convocation lack real authority. It is a mistake to suppose that the officers of a body can decide matters affecting that body without its assent, least of all in the Church of Christ. The primitive Church, according to Archbishop Benson, was the first representative assembly in the world, an institution "rich with the freedom and the order of the coming society".¹ Charles Gore wrote that "to co-ordinate the laity with the clergy in regulating the affairs of the Church is only deliberately to return to the primitive ideal of the New Testament and the purest Christian centuries".² The episcopal principle requires the acceptance of a hierarchy to safeguard doctrine, but the Church of Christ is to be a "hierarchy largely tempered by spiritual democracy".³ The whole Church is intended to act together, with no difference made between doctrinal and lesser matters, if she is to conform to her own apostolic ideal.

That ideal, as the 1902 Report on the Position of the Laity⁴ made clear, has been lost in the Church of England, and in losing it we have

lost the people. For the people have come by long experience to distrust professional authority and to recognize its limitations.

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The urgent need of the Church of England is to restore the people to their rightful place as members of the Body from which, by accident rather than design, they have been excluded. The Reformation in the sixteenth century was in intention a return to the primitive ideal and it was largely the work of the laity, carrying out their determination to reform the Church through Parliament.⁵ As a consequence, Parliament ever since has represented the rights of the laity of the Church of England. This trust was not cancelled by the creation in 1921 of a Church Assembly comprising an equal number of clergy and laity and the forty-three diocesan bishops. The Church Assembly's authority from the beginning was limited by the Convocations to legislative and administrative matters, and the definition of doctrine excluded from its terms of reference. Hence, on doctrinal questions and on matters which affect the constitution of the Church of England and its relations with Crown and State, the laity still speak through Parliament, which remains, by the act of Convocation in 1919 as well as by tradition, trustee for the laity in the Church of England.

Looking back to 1919, when the Enabling Act was introduced, we can see that the Convocations at that time blocked the return of the Church of England to a primitive basis of Christian government such as exists in the Church of Scotland, and in consequence left the authority of the Church weak and divided. Today the time seems ripe to complete the work for which Charles Gore laboured, to restore the Church of England to itself, and thereby to give it real authority in the eyes of the nation.

The way has been prepared by the thirteen-year-long process of canon law revision, the first comprehensive revision to be undertaken by the Church of England for three centuries. At the time of the Reformation the revision of the law of the Church was put in the hands of a commission under the eye of the Sovereign with equal participation by clergy and laity. Four centuries later, when the Archbishops came to address the members of the House of Laity of the Church Assembly about a new revision of the canons, the laity were informed that they had lost their rights but would be consulted as an act of grace. To this the laity replied by asserting politely but firmly their inherent rights as fellow-members of the Church, confirmed by the bishops in the Bishops' Book of 1537 (sometimes confused with the King's Book of 1543) and restated by the Synodical Government Commission of 1902 in the document already mentioned (*The Position of the Laity in the Church*). A new Commission on the rights of the laity was thereupon appointed by the Archbishops and it reported in the same sense as the 1902 Commission. The laity had indeed lost their rights but they ought to be restored. "What we are urging," the report said, "is that the laity should be given precisely that degree of power, neither more nor less, which the clergy in the Lower Houses of Convocation already possess."⁶

Because of opposition from some—although not from all—of its clerical members to the proposal to amalgamate the Convocations with the Church Assembly, the 1958 Commission came down in favour of

attaching houses of laymen to the Convocations, although this would have perpetuated the present complicated and dual system of church government. Opinion both amongst the clergy and laity since 1958 has, however, moved in the direction of establishing a National Synod to include both Convocations and the Church Assembly, whose clerical members are in any case the same. The meetings of the National Synod would be divided between debates concerning church order and consequential administrative and legislative business. The Convocations would continue to represent the clergy; the National Synod the whole Church. The preparation of measures and canons, the revision of services, and other work of church government would be distributed between the two parts of the body, clerical and lay, as seemed best to the standing committee of the National Synod, and all such matters brought before the latter body for approval and authority. This Synod would probably need to meet less frequently than the present Church Assembly and Convocations. One or two meetings a year instead of three would probably be enough. There could be separate sessions of the Convocations, which would remain wholly clerical bodies and retain their ancient customs and procedure. But, in addition, the clergy would meet the laity in Synod to consider the canons and conduct church business. Thus the laity would be given the opportunity, which they do not now have, to hear and take part in discussion on church order, baptism and confirmation, marriage and divorce, liturgy, relations with other churches, and canons, along with the clergy of the two provinces. Such, I believe, is the pattern of the future. How soon can it be brought into being?

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The Convocations are at present engaged in the redefinition of Lawful Authority. Parliament is soon to be asked to agree to a period of liturgical experiment to go on alongside the present statutory forms of service. But the Convocations contain no laymen, although liturgical experiment is the concern of the whole Church and not only of its officers. Clearly the right of experiment requires the right of lay assent. Thus the synodical position of the laity is involved in the request by the Church for more freedom to experiment and amend its services. From a spiritual viewpoint it is imperative that the people of God go forward together in amending their worship so as the better to preach the Gospel and to proclaim Christ's Kingdom to the nation. Parliament cannot wish to hinder the Church of England if it is united in that intention. It can, however, and in the writer's opinion should, see to it that the laity are given their proper place within the Church in the process of internal law-making so that according to the ancient principle of the Church of Christ nothing is done without the assent of the laity.

Does this mean that when a National Synod has been created by a fresh Enabling Act, the Church will be disestablished? This is a possibility, as the Archbishop of Canterbury indicated in the course of his enthronement address, but if it happens it will be by the will of the State, rather than of the Church. The Church seeks new life and liberty. It does not seek a quarrel with the State, nor a divorce from a

marriage which goes back, not only to Norman, but to Anglo-Saxon, days. England has ever been a realm in which, as Hooker and Warburton saw, Church and State are allied in a common cause: the Church's function being to hallow the secular life and to act as a spiritual guide to the nation. It is not for the Church to deny the connection by turning its back on the State. It is always possible that the State may in future take some step which would compel the bishops to resign as a body from the House of Lords, such as the deliberate denial of the principle of Sunday observance, or of Christian marriage. Even then it would be for the Church to declare its position unequivocally and to await the result; not to separate out of pique or distrust.

We sometimes, as members of the Church of England, risk giving the impression that we think England has fallen so far short of being Christian that the Church of England can no longer with a clear conscience remain in the same relationship with the State as in the past. This is to be guilty of confusing the English State with the English people. Insofar as the moral conduct of the people is concerned the Church's obligation is no less than that of the State. If moral standards have declined and are declining, it is the duty of the Church to proclaim God's law and His commandments to the nation. This, by general agreement, the Church of England has been failing to do since the war. Its theology of society is weak, its grasp of the connection between the law of God and the Gospel of Christ tenuous, and its general drift inward-looking and antinomian. The Ten Commandments, which F. D. Maurice considered as the instrument *par excellence* of national reformation, are generally left out of the Communion Service, watered down in the new Catechism, and brushed aside by the clergy as irrelevant and out-of-date. There is profound theological confusion about the relation of the Law to the Gospel. Men in training for ordination are no longer examined in ethics. In these circumstances the Church cannot blame the State for the national decline in morals; it is equally the responsibility of both. Both have failed to give a lead; the Church by the weakness of its preaching and prophecy, the State by allowing moral standards to be eroded in the interest of big business.

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It is possible to take an even less favourable view of the Church of England's discharge of its obligations to the people of England in recent years, although Church people may dislike and even resent what has now to be said. When ordinary people may be refused baptism, confirmation, or marriage at the whim of an individual priest who puts himself before the law of the Church of which he is a member, when the clergy forsake their centuries-old tradition of charity to non-conformists by barring the Holy Communion (a disorder for which the new canons provide a remedy), when the services, especially that of Holy Communion, are conducted in a manner inconsistent with the theology of the Prayer Book, the question arises as to whether the Church of England is any longer fit to remain in an official relation to the nation, if unable to regulate its affairs in a more orderly and charitable manner. These criticisms may be based upon exceptional cases but if they persist the time will surely arrive when the State will again be asked to make over

the parish churches and cathedrals to a re-formed and re-united Church more in keeping with the orderly traditions and faith of the English people as a whole. In these circumstances any attempted disestablishment of the Church of England would open up the whole question of re-creating a national protestant Church with the assistance of the State.

It is a mistake also to confuse the shortcomings of the people with those of the State. It is arguable that the State as such is not less but more Christian than it has been for many years. We have today a State pledged to full employment instead of one which tolerates the social indignity of millions without work, as in the 1930's. We have a State which tries to give every child some degree of equality of opportunity through a national system of education in place of the gross inequalities tolerated in the past, a State which honours justice and fair-dealing at home and abroad, a State which has divested itself of an empire since 1945 and today stands four-square for peace and the rule of law. Nor has the Church been as willing as the State to embrace those principles of representative government of which Archbishop Benson showed the early Christian Church to have been the nursery and progenitor. It is to be hoped that under the new Archbishops there will be a revival of the Church's moral witness and renewed study of the Bible. Until then the State's attitude to the Church might be to repeat the taunt, "Physician heal thyself."

In these circumstances three things seem of outstanding importance in the emerging relations of Church and State : (1) the Church should be able to speak with authority as a fellowship of all its members, and to do this it needs to have some form of National Synod ; (2) the Church must re-establish its moral witness to the nation ; (3) the Church must be prepared to speak out and suffer the consequences, not to precipitate a quarrel with the State by taking unilateral action leading towards disestablishment.

Can Parliament retain its trusteeship for the laity in the light of the emerging relationship of State and Church? I believe it can and should. Members of Parliament still represent the ordinary layman, as Proctors in Convocation represent the ordinary clergy. Neither body by itself truly represents the Church, although each represents an interest that is legitimate and important in the Church and should when occasion arises be able to speak for it. Parliament, in addition, is a trustee for the comprehensiveness of the Church, and it is also the duty of Parliament to see that the standards of justice adopted in the Church do not fall below its own.

By setting an example of responsible government in which the laity fully participate and by desiring to reinforce its relations with the State, I believe the Church of England will best show its faith in the English people and lend support to those principles of representative government which the British have carried, along with their system of law, into every part of the world. It must always be remembered that this British form of government and law is rooted in the mighty acts of God in history of which the Bible is the sacred record and the Church of England the historic guardian. I look to see a re-established Church of England, united in loyalty to the Crown, with all its parts working in

harmonious concert, in co-operation with and at the same time in freedom from the State, episcopal, strong, embracing the Methodist, Presbyterian, and Baptist Churches, active in bearing the moral responsibility which the alliance between Church and State demands, to the glory of God and to the strengthening of His Kingdom on earth.

¹ *Cyprian*, by Archbishop Benson (1897), p. 174.

² *Essays on Church Reform* (1898), p. 8.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁴ *The Position of the Laity in the Church*, being the Report of the Joint Committee of Canterbury Convocation (1902).

⁵ Professor Neale has shown in *Elizabeth and Her Parliaments* that the 1559 Prayer Book was put through Parliament by the laity in spite of a hostile Convocation.

⁶ *The Convocations and the Laity* (CA.1240), p. 26.

The Authority of the Bible Today

BY LEON MORRIS

ALL Christians agree that their ultimate authority is God. But to the question, "How is this ultimate authority mediated to men?" various answers are given. Broadly speaking, these reduce to three according as most weight is given to the authority seen within the believer (the consecrated reason, or the believer's experience of God), within the Church, or within the Bible. In practice we all give some allegiance to all three. Thus evangelicals who put their emphasis on the Bible come behind no man in their insistence on the full exercise of reason, on the necessity for a personal experience of Christ and His Spirit, and on the fact that the Bible must be read in the fellowship of the Church. Nevertheless, the distinction is a valid one. In the last resort what counts with the evangelical is the authority of the Bible, just as what counts with the liberal is the exercise of reason, and with the "catholic" the authority of the Church.

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There cannot be the slightest doubt but that from the earliest times Christians have conceived of their authority as rooted in the Bible. The New Testament writers recognized that of themselves they were not sufficient, but they claimed that they had a sufficiency which came from God (II Cor. iii. 5f.). Peter said they spoke "by the Holy Spirit" (I Peter i. 12). The claims they made were not exclusively for the spoken word, for Paul specifically referred to the things which he was writing as the command of the Lord (I Cor. xiv. 37), and II Peter iii. 16 classes the Pauline writings as scripture. More could be cited. The men of the New Testament recognized that all that they did rested on the fact that in Jesus of Nazareth God Himself had become incarnate. The salvation He wrought was consequently God's salvation. It was a salvation that God commanded to be proclaimed to men. And God Himself was in the proclaiming as in the accomplishing of this salvation. His Spirit superintended all that was done. Before the apostles were taken away He guided them as they wrote words which should be authoritative for all that came after.