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Churchman

EDITORIAL

A FAULTY VIEW OF THE CHURCH?

‘At this time in the life of the Church of England and the Anglican Communion, faced with a faulty view of revelation, false teaching and indiscipline, we believe that it is necessary to set out where we as orthodox Anglicans stand, and to invite others to join us.’

With these ringing words, a representative group of leading conservative Evangelicals in the Church of England has composed a ‘covenant’ in which they have taken a stand for key issues of gospel truth which they claim are currently under threat inside the Church and which consequently need to be re-affirmed. As might be imagined, opposition to their position has not been slow to surface and it has come from a variety of different sources. There can be no doubt that the ‘covenant’ is the immediate product of a particular set of circumstances which are unprecedented in the life of the Church of England. One important factor is the struggle to break free of the traditional parish system, especially in urban areas where it has long since broken down. Today churches have to be planted where people are and cater to their needs. There are many housing estates and ethnic minority groups which need a worship centre which they cannot have because it would technically infringe on the ‘rights’ of an incumbent who never goes near them and who probably could not minister to them even if he wanted to.

This is an absurd situation which is now being modified by canon, so that from February 2007 it will be possible for new churches to be constituted on territory technically ‘belonging’ to some other parish. Evangelicals have been in the forefront of the drive for such a measure, but it affects many people other than them and has received broad support across the church. The snag, however, is that the diocesan bishop must approve of such church plants before they can go ahead, and the evidence is that some bishops will be awkward, particularly towards conservative Evangelicals, and refuse them their permission. The result will be ecclesiastical anarchy and the establishment of para-Anglican churches, since the needs of people on the ground cannot be

sacrificed to the vanity of highly-placed ecclesiastics, some of whom need reminding of what mission is all about.

This in turn raises another factor at work, which is equally visible in the words of the ‘covenant’. Many church dignitaries, and indeed many of the bishops opposed to this ‘covenant’, are fervent supporters of causes which have no scriptural warranty and which, in some cases, are explicitly forbidden in the Bible. Women’s leadership is one of these, and it is interesting to note that, in spite of the approval given to that back in 1992, not a single large church in England (‘large’ being defined as having 300 regular worshippers or more on a Sunday) has a woman minister in charge of it. Not one! This statistic, provided by a recent survey conducted by people sympathetic to women clergy, is particularly interesting now that the question of women bishops is looming on the horizon. A bishop is by definition a leader, yet there is not one woman who can reasonably claim to have attained that status at the parochial level. Where then will these women bishops come from? From the ranks of archdeacons and cathedral staff is the answer, where they have been appointed regardless of the wishes of those whom they are expected to serve. Everyone knows that once the measure goes through, there will be enormous pressure to appoint women bishops in virtually every diocese, yet there is no sign that they have had any real impact at the grassroots level or that parishes really want them. Here there is a crisis of credibility, which the ‘covenant’ addresses in terms of ‘appointments’, insisting that these should come from the local church and not be imposed by some outside (and unrepresentative) body.

At this point, the authors of the ‘covenant’ come up against a practical problem which they cannot solve within the present system, or even within the limits of their own imaginations. This is that they want orthodox oversight and discipline, which the current theologically-mixed episcopate is often unable to provide but cannot accept moves made in the direction of tighter structures because these will be conceived and operated by the wrong kind of people. Critics say that they cannot have it both ways, and that what they are really trying to do is to turn the Church into a sect, or else to hive off into one by themselves. This conclusion is unfair, but one can understand how it might be arrived at. Structures may have certain advantages and disadvantages, but in the end, their success depends on the quality of those who are called to administer them. It is here that the real problem emerges. It is no good for the

bishops to complain when everyone knows that there has been great resistance to the appointment of any truly conservative Evangelical to the diocesan bench.

Given the present set-up, it is almost inconceivable that a biblically orthodox person will ever be given preferment if only because such a person would not ordain women, and would therefore be a liability in the current situation. What the authors of the 'covenant' are struggling to come to terms with is the necessity of a parallel system of jurisdiction, such as that proposed by a number of Anglo-Catholics. We do not have to go as far as a 'third province' but the only way to ensure that the standards the authors of the 'covenant' want to uphold are taken seriously is to make provision for episcopal oversight which is fully submitted to the faith once delivered to the saints, and not likely to fall for some new interpretation of it.

These issues have been slowly bubbling beneath the surface for some time, but what has concentrated minds wonderfully is the issue of practising homosexual clergy. When Evangelicals objected to the appointment of Jeffrey John as bishop of Reading in 2003, they did not expect that he would be offered the deanery of St. Albans as a consolation prize, nor did they imagine that he would enter into a civil partnership with his long-term male lover. Yet both of these things have happened, and no-one has effectively challenged them. It may be unfair to single out Dr. John, who is only the most prominent of many such cases, and in Evangelical eyes the same principle applies to them all. As far as they are concerned, a practising homosexual is not fit to be a bishop because he is not fit to be in the ministry at all. A clergyman who enters a same-sex relationship, however 'celibate' it may claim to be, is causing a public scandal and ought to be defrocked. Obviously many in the Church disagree with this, but for Evangelicals the position is clear and the recent failure to respect it has been one of the major reasons why the 'covenant' has surfaced at this particular point.

Underlying all of this is a realisation that the leadership of the Church of England has tolerated these departures from traditional values because they have drifted away from the historic Christian faith, although officially they claim to have discovered new insights in Scripture. The key issue here is biblical hermeneutics. Anglicans talk a lot about 'Scripture, tradition and reason',

forgetting that ‘tradition’ and ‘reason’ are code words for the interpretative principles which they use to understand Scripture. Anglicans are not free to adopt untested or unreasonable interpretations of the Bible, even if there are eminent scholars who propound them. Scholars have to be allowed to put forward their theories, of course, but the notion that the church as a whole should meekly accept them without demur is extraordinary. For example, when someone suggests that women should be consecrated as bishops because Mary Magdalene was the first apostle, we must protest—not at the conclusion arrived at (though of course we disagree with that too)—but at the hermeneutical process used to get there.

We must insist that the Bible is a coherent message, given by one God and intended to be a consistent revelation of himself and of his plan for the human race. The fact that he created male and female in that order, and with the command to cleave to one another and become one flesh, is not irrelevant to our understanding of marriage or of church ministries, but an integral part of it. Those with a coherent view of Scriptural teaching reject same-sex marriages and women’s leadership for essentially the same reason—they both go against the order of creation. They are appalled when they hear people claim that what Paul says about male-female relationships in the context of marriage cannot be applied to ministerial office, or that because a Greek word like *kephale* (head) can have a score of different meanings, any one of them may be pressed into service in biblical interpretation, as long as it suits the views of the interpreter. As for the notion that biblical opposition to homosexual practice can be put down to ignorance or cultural prejudice and is therefore irrelevant to our more enlightened age—words fail them!

Here the modern church suffers from a lack of coherent biblical theology, and conservative Evangelicals must bear their share of the blame for this. For years, many of them have claimed to be ‘biblical’ but have sat loose to anything that smacked of systematic theology. Others, reacting against this, have all too often fallen for an existing system (usually neo-Calvinist or Barthian) without bothering to examine its biblical credentials. The result is that they have reinforced the prejudices of their anti-systematic brethren, even as they have ostensibly been trying to overcome them. This is the great challenge which faces us today as a church. We have to recover biblical theology, not as this has been understood in the twentieth-century, where it has all too often fallen for

atomistic word studies and the like, but as it was understood by the great saints of the church down through the ages. Chrysostom, Augustine, Aquinas, Luther and Calvin were very different from each other in many ways, and we would not now endorse everything they said and did, but they remain the pillars of theologically-grounded biblical interpretation because they understood that the Bible makes sense—as a unit, as a whole. They did not interpret one passage against another, and use this to justify some kind of pluralism in the church. On the contrary, they did all they could to maintain the harmony of the text overall, even when this was by no means easy to do.

As their modern followers, today's Evangelicals respect them for their intentions, even when they accept that they must move beyond them if they are to be faithful to those intentions in the present circumstances. Evangelical Christianity is essentially a post-Enlightenment version of orthodoxy which has been in conflict with modern rationalism and atheism since it emerged in the early eighteenth-century. It has always held to a doctrine of 'Scripture alone' but to date it has not produced a truly authoritative version of what that is. To be sure, Evangelicals know it in their hearts and can articulate it when particular issues are raised, just as pre-Nicene Christians could, but they have not yet expressed it in a systematic way. As a result, it is often difficult to say precisely what Evangelicals believe, and they are dangerously open to the charge that much of their thinking is little more than traditionalist prejudice. Given that Evangelicals are among the most innovative members of the Church of England, this is an odd accusation to lay at their door, but it is motivated by the perception that, underneath all the modernity of style and presentation, Evangelicals have not changed their core beliefs one little bit.

The reason for this is not blind conservatism, but an awareness that at the most fundamental level, human nature has not changed one little bit either. The message and work of Jesus Christ is as valid and as relevant today as it has ever been, and it does not bend to accommodate the passing fashions of this or of any other age. Nor is it because Evangelicals have a faulty view of the church. They perceive quite clearly that the church consists of all those, in every generation, who bear faithful witness to the same truths which they advocate in our day. It does not matter how they were baptized, who ordained them or how they came into our fellowship. Heaven is not populated with Anglicans, but with believers, some of whom have come to faith through Anglican

ministries, but most of whom have not. The same is true, in reverse, of hell, which is certainly not barred to Anglicans any more than it is to anyone else who relies on labels and structures as a substitute for living faith. May God grant us courage, wisdom and insight to articulate that truth for a new generation, so that we may continue to confess that Jesus Christ is the way, the truth and the life, and that no-one can come to the Father—except by him.

GERALD BRAY