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Churchman

EDITORIAL

The Broken Body of Christ

In a message issued shortly before Easter, the Archbishop of York reminded us that recent conflicts in the church have produced a situation in which the unbelieving world outside can no longer hear the gospel of Christ or experience its transforming power. The terms in which he spoke will echo in the hearts of many who are weary of debating things like homosexuality and would rather move on to something more central to the Christian message. It is hard to disagree with the Archbishop, and we must all hope and pray that his call will soon become a reality, hard as it may be to see how it can be realised in the current climate.

Before we despair of the church, we should remember that the debates which have been raging over the past few years have mostly taken place in synods, conventions and international meetings of primates, which are remote from the lives of everyday churchgoers. The impression that what these bodies say and do is of monumental importance, is promoted by the press which relishes every opportunity it gets to paint Christians—and especially orthodox Christians—in the worst possible light. But beyond all this, most ordinary people have been uninvolved in the discussions, many are only partially aware of what the issues at stake are, and almost all are preoccupied with other things. The press does not pick up on the day-to-day activities of the average parish, unless there are extraordinary circumstances which make them suddenly newsworthy. Unfortunately, most of the time these are negative stories about wayward vicars or curious local disputes, but not always. A good example of positive reporting occurred shortly before Christmas last year when the serial killing of five prostitutes near Ipswich forced the media to report that the local churches (of all denominations) were fully involved with the victims' families and leading both the mourning and the soul-searching of which their communities were in sudden and desperate need. It is tragic that it takes murder to bring this kind of thing out, but it reminds everyone that the church is there when it counts, and we must be grateful for the honest recognition of this by a usually sceptical press.

Travel up and down the land listening to sermons and sharing in the worship of local congregations, and it is highly unlikely that the current controversies in the church will figure in what you hear and experience. You will certainly encounter a great variety of themes and styles, but it is certain that as a casual visitor you will be more likely to hear a sermon on the need to repent and turn to Christ than one pressing you into taking sides in the homosexual debate. This is particularly true in Evangelical churches, which (according to the media) are the ones most exercised by deviant forms of sexuality, but which in truth have never lost sight of the centrality of the gospel message and continue to proclaim it faithfully from one week to the next. The sad thing is that this is not ‘news’ and so it goes unreported.

The unfairness of this media bias came across most clearly during the recent celebrations for the two-hundredth anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade in the British Empire. Although not without its anomalies and controversies, that event was fundamentally the work of a dedicated band of Evangelical Christians who were led in Parliament by William Wilberforce. A film produced to mark the occasion was, as films go, a remarkably fair and accurate portrayal of the historical events. Nobody portrayed in it came out looking improbably saintly, nor were the opponents of abolition presented as irredeemably evil. The complexity of the issues involved was duly acknowledged, as was the religious motivation of those who were campaigning to end the trade. Even those whom a cynic might regard as the token woman (Hannah Moore) and the token African (Olaudah Equiano) actually existed and played the parts assigned to them in the film, so for once political correctness and historical truth marched hand in hand. The appearance of the film, and the commemoration in general, could have been a wonderful occasion for reminding people of the transforming power of the gospel, yet somehow our church leaders missed their opportunity. Even finding a cinema which was showing the film was not all that easy, and anyone away on holiday would have missed it because these days films disappear from the public screen so fast that many people have barely had time to notice that they have arrived.

Another recent event of considerable potential importance was the publication, not long after the film came out, of a book called *Pierced for our Transgressions*. As its title might suggest, this a ringing restatement of the penal substitutionary doctrine of the atonement, which lies at the heart of our faith

and is justly be regarded as the core of the transforming power of the gospel message. The three authors are Church of England clergymen, one of them principal-elect of a theological college, which suggests that there are people in the church who are doing exactly what the Archbishop of York wishes. An Internet site dedicated to promoting it has already attracted over a thousand subscribers, which for a book like that is nothing short of astonishing. One would think that any bishop interested in evangelism (and which of them is not?) would be recommending this book to his clergy and lay people and encouraging them to study it in preparation for the great task of mission in today's world. Yet curiously, there is only silence from the house of bishops, which is most unlikely to endorse the book or do anything to promote it, despite its obvious importance for the preaching and teaching of God's Word.

Perhaps they have been too weighed down by reports about splits over homosexuality to have noticed this book's appearance, but the seasoned observer of the ecclesiastical scene will also remember that penal substitution is not a doctrine universally admired in today's church. Indeed, in an article printed in "The Times" on Maundy Thursday, the Dean of St. Albans managed to condemn it as a view which makes God appear to be a psychopath! His opinion is far from being unique or eccentric in the higher echelons of the church, and many prominent people share it, even if few of them would express themselves quite as bluntly as the Dean did. Yet how can the Archbishop of York expect the gospel to be heard if prominent spokesmen of the church do not understand it or believe it themselves?

It will be objected that penal substitution is just one theory of atonement among others, that the majority of Christians over the centuries have not held it (at least not consciously) and that it is the wrong model to use, both because it does not accord well with modern sentiment and because it is not a true interpretation of what the New Testament (especially the apostle Paul) teaches. Let us be honest and admit that there is some truth in these objections. There are indeed other theories of the atonement which continue to be advocated in the church at large, and they most certainly contain important elements of truth. For example, the so-called 'classical' theory according to which Jesus did battle with the power of evil and overcame Satan on the cross is quite true, and in a world which finds it hard to believe in the existence of such evil, it is important to be reminded of that fact. Believers in penal substitution do not

deny this; what we say is that the classical theory, for all its merits, is inadequate to do justice to the fullness of the biblical teaching. Much the same must be said for the so-called ‘exemplary’ theory, which states that Jesus died as an example for us to follow. Again, there is some truth in this—we are certainly called to take up our cross and follow him—but the notion that Jesus was essentially the first Christian, pointing the way towards a new and higher form of spirituality for us to adopt, completely ignores the fact that he is our Lord and Saviour, who did something for us on the cross that we cannot do for ourselves.

Finally, the so-called ‘satisfaction’ theory of the atonement tells us that Jesus died for the sins of the whole world, which is also true, but neglects to stress that he died for sinners, not for sins in the abstract—for people, not for things. He who knew no sin, ‘became sin’ for us so that we might be delivered from the power of sin—by his stripes we are healed. If the personal element implied by the concept of substitution is downplayed or ignored, there is no relationship between us and God, and the sacrifice of Christ is detached from faith. If the punishment due for our sins has not been paid by him, then we shall still have to bear it ourselves, and the heart of the gospel is suddenly torn out completely. As with the other theories, those who hold to penal substitution do not deny that the satisfaction model has something important to say, but once again, it does not go far enough.

As for the claim that the great majority of Christians have not held to penal substitution, that is only true if we insist on a precise definition of the terms we use to describe it. That is relatively modern and grew out of the great controversies of the Reformation era, but the substance of the doctrine goes back to the New Testament and has always been the hallmark of the true believer. A Roman Catholic who believes in the real presence of Christ in the eucharist is not denying penal substitution but affirming it, even if this affirmation takes a form with which we disagree. Transubstantiation is an indefensible doctrine, but its original purpose was to put Christ, and not some symbolic representation of him, at the heart of our worship as a reminder that he does indeed take our place before the judgement seat of God. Those who consume the consecrated host of the mass may be wrong to think that they are taking Christ into their bodies, but at least they realise that they need him and his sacrifice for their salvation and cannot do this for themselves.

The fundamental problem in the church today is that so few of its most prominent voices understand this or think that it is of central importance. What they talk about are concepts like ‘equality’ and ‘justice’, which are also Christian themes very closely connected to the gospel, but which are usually expressed in ways that reflect the trendy social morality of our time rather than the message of Christ. In Christian terms, the equality of human beings has two aspects to it. First, we are equal because of our creation in Adam and Eve, and then we are equal because of our sinfulness—which also comes from Adam and Eve. As the apostle Paul put it: ‘All have sinned and come short of the glory of God.’ It is because of this fundamental equality that everyone needs the gospel in order to be saved. To refuse to proclaim it, or to withhold it from Jews and Muslims (for example) because we do not wish to cause offence to them, is actually to deny the basic principle of equality which unites us with them as sinners who need to be reconciled with our Creator.

This is what Christians mean by equality, but the modern world sees it very differently. For the secular media, and for too many leaders of the church, equality is all a question of ‘rights’. To be equal means to have the same rights as others—a noble ideal, but one which cannot be applied in practice for the simple reason that deferring to the ‘rights’ of one person might easily infringe the conscience of another. This has become very clear in the discussion about the sexual orientation regulations which have been introduced by the government with little or no parliamentary debate. Most of the regulations are fairly uncontroversial, but on some subjects they touch fundamental principles which cannot be sacrificed by those who are opposed to them on grounds of conscience. When an adoption agency is forced to treat a same-sex couple on a par with a heterosexual, married one, there is bound to be friction, and we must be grateful to our archbishops for pointing this out—and for objecting to the coercion of unwilling consciences in this matter.

Issues of equality, understood as ‘rights’ easily spill over into questions of justice, which is the immediate reaction of secularists when they are faced with pleas of conscientious objection. Same-sex couples have a right to be treated like any others, they maintain, and to deny them that right is an act of injustice. Nobody stops to consider the ‘rights’ of the child who may be forced to have two parents of the same sex without any opportunity to object, and of course, the misgivings of religious people are simply absurd. We must be grateful to

our archbishops for speaking out against this sort of logic, but our gratitude is tempered by the realisation that they have spoken out in defence of the consciences of Roman Catholics, not Anglicans, who apparently comply with the new regulations whether they want to or not.

So even an apparent defence of Christian principles on the part of the hierarchy turns out to be less than it might appear at first sight. Part of the reason for this must surely be that the leadership of the Anglican church is not agreed about fundamental moral principles, and for the archbishops to speak out would risk dividing the church. This is an absurd situation to be in, and yet it seems that that is precisely where we are at the moment. Does this imply that if the archbishops were to go around preaching the gospel, there would be objections from within the church? Unfortunately, the answer to this question is probably 'yes'. In the eyes of many, for the archbishops to do that would be a concession to the 'fundamentalists' (read: conservative Evangelicals) and in their opinion, there have been too many of those already, as their apparent reluctance to bow down to the homosexual lobby makes clear.

There are many reasons why the church is not listened to in the modern world, and there is little that anyone, even an archbishop, can do about it. The gospel is good news to those who are dying, but it is not news at all to most of the media who would far prefer to report some atypical scandal in a rural church than the proclamation of the message of eternal salvation from a prominent city pulpit. An evangelistic campaign might get some coverage, probably negative—regarded as an offence to people of other faiths, for example. Whatever line the media take, the true meaning of it all will be missed and trying to reverse this situation by pleading for fairer treatment is futile. The blind cannot see even if they are encouraged to do so, and we must not expect anything better.

Having said that, there is something that is within our power to change. This is the sad fact that there are too many people in the church who speak on its behalf, but who do not accept the fundamental teachings of Christianity. How is it possible for a minister of the church to state publicly that the God we worship is a psychopath, without being disciplined for it? How can it be that those who preach the gospel are consistently ignored by the leaders of the church, and not infrequently slighted or even harrassed because of it? Why is it that we know with absolute certainty that none of the authors of *Pierced for*

our Transgressions will be publicly acknowledged, let alone praised, by anyone in authority in the church for their ringing reaffirmation of the gospel? Perhaps when the Archbishop of York next speaks about the need to concentrate on the essential message we are called to proclaim, he will address these issues and reassure us by grappling with such issues that the Church of England is solidly and openly supportive of the transforming truth which he so rightly wants us to be known for.

GERALD BRAY