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Churchman

EDITORIAL

Without a preacher?

The recent fiasco in Central London billed as NEAC 5 has made it clear that the Evangelical world of the Church of England as we have known it for the past generation is falling apart. Quite why this should be so is one of the matters in dispute, and there is probably no single or simple answer, but it may be useful to consider some of the factors which have contributed to the present situation and let readers decide for themselves what priority they would assign to them.

At the most basic level, human beings have a way of seeing things differently, and people with strong convictions are liable to let their differences develop into equally strong disagreements. Objective facts do not always influence this tendency, as the existence of the Flat Earth Society more than 500 years after Christopher Columbus reminds us. (That most Flat Earthers seem to live in the lands Columbus discovered is one of those ironies that helps to make the point even more forcefully.) Many years ago this journal published an article by Sir Frederick Catherwood who made a Christian case for the European Union, where he had served for many years as a member of the European Parliament. Much to our surprise, that article provoked a stream of vitriolic correspondence from people opposed to the European Union. They may have had good reasons for their opinion, but if so they did not express them very clearly and preferred to attack a fellow because he happened to disagree with them on this point. We have also learned from experience that the slightest hint that there may be something good in Roman Catholicism will bring out those who see papal tyranny as infinitely more dangerous to our civil and religious liberties than Islamic terrorism or modern secularism. Again, they may be right, but Christian charity is not high on their agenda and the way they go about making their case can leave a sour taste in the mouths of those who see things differently.

Much the same can be said for those who engage in debates over creationism. This is not an issue close to the hearts of most Anglican Evangelicals, who can probably be classed as 'theistic evolutionists' or 'evolutionary theists', but for

those who care, it has all the characteristics of an intense theological battle. In a general way, every Christian is committed to some kind of creationism and to ‘intelligent design’, because that is the clear teaching of Genesis 1. The arguments are not about that, but about the means by which the created order came into being. Was it all produced in six twenty-four hour days or did it develop in stages over a long period of time? Is there room within a doctrine of creation for theories of evolution?

Here opinions differ and in Britain at least, most Evangelical scientists would reject the literalist reading of Genesis that has been given the label ‘creationism’. Unfortunately though, creationists have a lot of money and can be very influential in circles where it counts—among Christian publishers especially, whom they can threaten with a loss of sales if they publish anything the creationists do not like. Theistic evolutionists have a hard time getting their views across because of this hidden censorship, but few of us notice or care about it because it is not something close to the heart of our own concerns.

It is as well to bear all this in mind when we come to look at the squabbles currently dividing Anglican Evangelicals. Foremost among them is the question of women’s ordination, which will not go away despite repeated attempts to sideline those who are opposed to it. This all began more than fifteen years ago when the leadership of the Evangelical world at that time was persuaded to accept the view that the ordination of women was an Anglo-Catholic problem that did not concern them. The Evangelical bishops all voted for it in general Synod, and they were able to win over just enough clergy and laity to let the measure pass.

It soon turned out that there were many Evangelicals (perhaps most) who did not go along with that decision and one of the results was the founding of Reform shortly afterwards. But rather than accept this reality, the Evangelical leadership that had voted for it refused to compromise. What they had originally claimed was a secondary matter turned out to be so important that alternative opinions could not be tolerated, a position that continues to dominate ‘open Evangelical’ circles. When the new Principal of Wycliffe Hall attempted to establish a balance in that institution between those in favour of, and those opposed to the ordination of women, the gates of hell were opened and he was viciously persecuted for doing no more than trying to be fair to both sides.

Another issue currently on the table is the way in which Evangelicals should engage with the wider Anglican Communion. Here there is more agreement than might at first be supposed. All Evangelicals accept that the Archbishop of Canterbury holds liberal views on issues related to homosexual practice—they have to, because he has expressed them in print. All Evangelicals also accept that the American Episcopal Church and (to a lesser extent) the Anglican Church of Canada, the Anglican Church of Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia and the Igreja Episcopal do Brasil have gone against the mind of the Communion and the universal tradition of the Christian Church in their willingness to accept practising homosexuals in their ministry and to bless same-sex unions. Most Evangelicals also agree that the response of the Communion as a whole to this has been ineffective. So far so good, but there the agreement ends.

What should we try to do about it? Can we sit back and watch as bishops, churches and even whole dioceses are excommunicated by liberals in the above-mentioned provinces, merely because they do not toe the line of the synodical majority there? It is all very well to emphasise the importance of following regular procedures, but what do we do when these are regularly and consistently flouted by those who have signed up to them? GAFCON was essentially a response to this. It was not perfect and there is much work still to do, but almost all observers agree that its Jerusalem Declaration is a mild, balanced and essentially irenic statement of core Anglican and Christian values. Yet when asked to sign it, many Evangelicals in the Church of England object. Some do so for essentially petty reasons—they do not like the wording in point 10 or 11 or whatever—but others seem to have deeper reservations. It is difficult not to sense that many of them are unsympathetic to biblical Christianity and are using excuses like ‘lack of consultation’ as smokescreens to cover their tracks. We at Churchman were not ‘consulted’ either, but we understand where GAFCON is coming from and we support it for that reason. To make a secular comparison, the allied raid on Dieppe in 1942 was a tragic error that caused unnecessary loss of life, but who at that time would have used it as an excuse to throw in the towel, or to surrender to the (still apparently triumphant) Axis powers? What mattered was the long-term victory over Nazi tyranny, not the short-term blunders of those on the Allied side, and fortunately most people at the time had the sense to understand that. GAFCON may make similar strategic mistakes which will be very costly in

some ways, but the important thing is to keep our eyes on the prize, which is the renewal of the church in biblical orthodoxy. Evangelicals who fail to see this are effectively aiding and abetting the enemy, and it is high time that our leaders came out and said so.

But mention of ‘our leaders’ brings us to yet another aspect of the problem currently confronting us. Where is that leadership to be found? The Church of England Evangelical Council (CEEC) is in good hands, but it is susceptible to the attacks of the left-wing in our midst and tends to defer to them more than it should, as NEAC 5 unfortunately testified. Theological colleges are too esoteric and consumed with their own issues, including their own survival, to be of much help and most voluntary societies have other agendas which they do not want to compromise by engaging in apparently irrelevant politics. So who is left? The Evangelical bishops are mostly unwilling or unable to take a lead in their own constituency, often citing their need to represent the ‘wider church’ as their excuse. People of other churchmanships pay little attention to them, but that does not seem to make any difference. However, bishops have seldom been leaders in the English Evangelical world (it is a different story overseas) and there is little point looking to them for help which they cannot provide.

To be a leader among Evangelicals is above all to be a clear and effective preacher of the gospel. This has always been the case, and long may it continue to be so. Evangelicalism exists as a missionary enterprise and if we lose sight of this we shall lose our reason for being and even our very souls. Our sights are fixed firmly on heaven, not on this world and not on the next meeting of General Synod (a world of its own) either. The gospel is not a disincarnate message, but a summons deeply rooted in the history of Israel, whose covenant relationship with God is clearly delineated in the Bible. As ‘good news’ it only makes sense in that context, which is why Evangelical preaching must be deeply rooted in Holy Scripture and in the principles which give it its meaning. The great themes of creation, the fall, the covenant, the promise of salvation and its fulfilment in Christ’s first and second comings—these are the warp and woof of the biblical message which cannot be watered down or compromised.

To those who may think that such an emphasis ignores current issues and amounts to another form of irresponsible evasion of our responsibilities, our response is that faithfulness to the teaching of Scripture gives us a means by

which we can judge the issues of the day and decide how to deal with them. The European Union, for example, is an economic arrangement with both good and bad points, but it is essentially irrelevant to the gospel. Like all empires, it will pass away in due course and we must not get bogged down in arguments about its merits or otherwise. The New Testament shows us how the Roman Empire was treated both positively and negatively, and Christians should adopt the same approach to its many successors. The Roman Catholic Church (and, for that matter, any other branch of Christianity, other religions or even atheism) must be respected and treated fairly, particularly if we believe that we are right on the matters at issue between us. The cause of truth will be advanced by fairness and accuracy, not by caricatures and prejudice and we have a duty to treat others with the same consideration that we expect from them.

On another front, creationism has its points, but Genesis 1 must not be made to say things that it does not. In particular, it is impossible to be dogmatic about a twenty-four hour creation day when the sun and moon were brought into being on the fourth of them—how was the ‘day’ measured before that? Theories do not have to be believed as matters of faith, but the freedom to express and develop them must be granted without condemning those who do so. The idea of muzzling responsible opinion by covert threats is repugnant to any fair-minded person and amounts to a denial of whatever truth it is that creationists are trying to defend.

Within the church itself, the ordination of women is clearly against the teaching of the New Testament, particularly if it leads to giving them authority over men in the church (as it must do if they are to be appointed bishops.) Others may take a different view, but the Apostle Paul cites both creation and the fall as grounds for this prohibition (1 Tim. 2:11-15) and we are not free to dispute his judgement in the matter. Unpopular as it is, we must be prepared to take a stand on a matter of clear biblical principle, even if we get into trouble with our peers and contemporaries for doing so.

As for the tactics we must use to counter liberalism in the Anglican Communion, different strategies are possible but we must be united on the principle that opposition is necessary and not allow petty disputes and personal jealousies to render it ineffective. Those who submit to the supreme authority of Holy Scripture should be able to see this quite clearly, and if they do not,

then we must regretfully (but resolutely) part company with them. If we do not do so, we shall be condemning ourselves and those we represent to endless arguments and disputes which will achieve nothing positive and end up destroying what little unity we have left. Many people think that such an outcome would be a disaster, but that is not necessarily the case. Twenty-five years ago there was a division in the editorial board of Churchman which led to the founding of another journal (Anvil). After some initial acrimony on the part of those who felt they had been driven out of Churchman, things settled down, the two journals went their separate ways and now it is only the aging who can remember that there was even a controversy to begin with. Much the same happened in an earlier generation with the split in the Church Missionary Society that led to the founding of the Bible Churchman's Missionary Society (now Crosslinks). Only historians know about this now and both societies continue to thrive independently of one another. Why should it not be the same if CEEC were to split and let Fulcrum and its followers go their separate way?

Evangelical leadership is not about endless patching-up of differences in an attempt to reconcile the irreconcilable, but about preaching the truth of Christ without fear or favour. This is not a popular option and we must fully expect to be opposed by any number of people, and for a variety of different motives. The Word of God is sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the divide between soul and spirit. Soul and spirit look the same to the outside observer, but in reality they are very different. The first is bound to this world and will perish with it; the second is rooted in eternity and will live for ever. Separating them out may be painful, but it is the only way to remain true to the calling that we have received from God himself. May God give us the grace to be true to that calling, to say to those who cannot follow us that they must go their own way and to get on with the immense task facing us as Evangelicals and as Christians faithful to the gospel and the Word of God.

GERALD BRAY