

# The Word and Discipline in the Church<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

Never write letters to *The Times*! Last November I and fifteen other members of the House of Laity did that, in the aftermath of the homosexuality debate, in order to draw attention to the fact that fifteen members of the House of Bishops had voted against their taking the 'appropriate' disciplinary action in cases of sexual immorality of the clergy. So when David Samuel rang me a few days later to ask me to read this paper to you I was deprived of the obvious excuse for declining—namely, that it was a subject of which I knew little. Thus in writing this paper I pay the penalty for my rushing into print!

It should not be thought that problems of discipline in the Church are of recent origin: even though the homosexuality issue has recently brought it into prominence. In varying degrees they have been present throughout my lifetime: and any student of church history will know that they have been about for the whole lifetime of the church. They occupied the thoughts of the Reformers: they were at least at the fringe of the thought of the Apostles.

Discipline has several aspects. On the one hand it is concerned with the way in which disputes between members of the Church should be resolved. On the other it is concerned with determining the limits which are acceptable—either in belief or behaviour—in its members or its office holders; and the means whereby, and the degree to which, those limits should be enforced. But such words cover a wide range of situations that have to be dealt with.

At the level of behaviour one may be considering the clergyman who openly professes homosexual acts: or one may be considering the problems raised by the clergyman of otherwise blameless life, who simply, for some reason, cannot work happily with his parishioners. Or one may be considering problems of church order, such as whether it is acceptable for the Bishop of London to conduct a confirmation in the United States of America without the goodwill of the local Bishop.

At the level of doctrine one may be considering whether the publicly expressed views of some dignitary do or do not conflict with the responsibility and dignity of his office, and the undertakings into which he has freely entered. Draw the circle too tightly, and one may inhibit legitimate attempts to probe the application of Scripture to

new and contemporary situations—and the heresy-hunting and frequent excommunications that have disfigured some of the more extreme non-conformist sects are encouraged. Draw the circle too widely, and one ends with a church that proclaims only its own confusion, and that demonstrates the truth of our Lord's word about salt that has lost its savour.

The answers are not easy. One can observe that some of those who are most desirous of improving the discipline of the clergy are also those who extol the freehold of the clergy, because it protects them from pressures that might inhibit their freedom to proclaim the Gospel. But by the same token it protects others from pressures that might inhibit their freedom to proclaim error in the name of the church. How do we protect truth without protecting error? How do we restrain error without risking restraining truth? When should wrong behaviour or teaching be subject to action in ecclesiastical courts, and when should they be dealt with by simpler executive action? Courts are expensive, public, and cumbersome: but if a man's livelihood may be at stake, is it a safeguard that can be disregarded?

Who should administer discipline? Does it belong to the office of the clergyman, or to the bishop, or to a court, or to the whole church? If we reply 'the whole church', how is this principle to be given effect in practice? Who should be subject to discipline? If bishops and clergy, why not the laity also: but if laity are to be included, how is the discipline to be enforced, and who is to administer it?

I would be the last to pretend that this paper will provide answers to all these questions: but it will have achieved its purpose if it clarifies some of our thinking, and if it suggests some lines along which a few of them might be answered.

## **The Testimony of Scripture**

Let us therefore turn and look first—as we always should—at what Scripture has to say.

The first observation one might justly make is that discipline, as such, does not figure very prominently in the New Testament. As regards disputes between Christians, we are taught in the Sermon on the Mount not to 'insist on our rights'. As regards disputes on doctrine or behaviour, the general method by which these were dealt with was by public debate. So when Peter behaves unworthily, Paul in Gal. 2.11 'withstands him to his face', and reasons why he should act differently. When doctrine is the issue, as in Acts 15, again the matter is publicly debated: recourse to 'discipline', courts, or excommunication was certainly not the first resort. Indeed other passages can be cited which discourage us from thinking too much in disciplinary terms—'Who are you to pass judgment—to his own Master he stands or falls'—says Paul in Romans 15.4: for judgment, in New Testament eyes, is fundamentally the preserve of God rather than of man.

Those who are over-keen to cast others out of the church might care to remember that being cast out of synagogues was the promised lot of the disciples: and that whenever men cast someone out Christ seemed to make it His business to go at once to the outcast. Public debate was common: disciplinary action was exceptional. And this ought to give some cause for thought to those evangelicals who since Keele have taken the easy course of refraining from public debate. The popularity that silence and compliance sometimes buys can be purchased at too high a cost. It is never Scriptural to condone error, whether overtly or through keeping silent.

The second observation which study of the Scriptures suggests relates to authority in disputes. In Matthew 18 our Lord tells us, if our brother sin against us, to seek to settle the matter privately with him alone. If that fails we are to take two or three with us. If that fails 'tell it to the church', and the decision of the church is to be accepted. The appeal is not to the elder, nor to the bishop or apostle, but to the church—the assembly of God's people. It is entirely consistent with this that we find St. Paul in II Cor. 2.6—dealing with a discipline case in the Corinthian Church—talking of 'punishment by the majority'. It is hard to escape the conclusion that discipline is to be exercised by the Church as a whole—or at least that the authority to do so rests in the Church as a whole, not in any particular order of officers. Incidentally, the Thirty-nine Articles in a somewhat similar manner state that the authority to decree Rites and Ceremonies lies in the Church under Scripture (Article 20) and the authority to ordain lies in the congregation, or those in the congregation to whom the function is lawfully assigned. (Article 23).

The third observation is that although discipline is not a major theme in the New Testament, there are none the less clear references to it. In Romans 16 St. Paul appeals to the Roman brethren to 'avoid' those who create dissensions and difficulties in opposition to the doctrine which they had been taught: and in I Cor. 5 he accuses the Corinthian Church of arrogance in that they had failed to deal with a case of incest, and calls on them to exercise judgment as a Church 'when you are assembled'. In the following chapter he rebukes them for going to law with each other before unbelievers asking 'Do you not know that the saints will judge the world. And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases?' Disputes in the Church are to be settled by appeal to the saints—to the Church—to the Church under Scripture. In II Cor. 13.1 he advises the same Church that any charge must be sustained by the evidence of two or three witnesses—a reference that clearly shows the Church as having on occasion judicial functions. In I Tim. 5.19–20 he advises Timothy never to admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses, and goes on to charge him to rebuke, in the presence of all, those who persist in sin.

Taken together these references seem to indicate that St. Paul saw the Church as having an occasional judicial function. It was to operate on substantiated evidence only. It was to pass judgment, where there was cause, on elders and on those who create dissension and difficulties in opposition to sound doctrine, which would probably have included those not ordained. The only sentences mentioned are 'avoiding' the offender, which presumably included excommunication, and public rebuke.

Reference must also be made to four other passages of Scripture. In Acts 8 Simon is rebuked by Peter for seeking to buy the power to bestow the Holy Spirit by laying on of hands. Rebuke of sin and of wrongful motives is, however, part of the proclamation of the Gospel. In Acts 13 Paul goes further, calling down temporary blindness on Elymas who was opposing the spread of the Gospel: but Elymas was an unbeliever and this incident, though noteworthy, is scarcely a case of discipline within the Church. The same cannot be said of the judgment pronounced by Peter on Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5, where the sin which is dealt with so severely is not a failure to give, but a conspiracy to lie to the Church by pretending that their qualified generosity was unqualified. Here was judgment and discipline in extreme form: pronounced by Peter without any judicial proceedings apart from asking one question. How far Peter was passing sentence, and how far he was merely announcing the predetermined judgment of God is a matter that can be debated. Certainly the New Testament sees discipline and judgment as primarily the province of God: and it is at least doubtful if it envisages it as a primary rôle of Apostle or Bishop. For in Matthew 20.25—one of those texts which we love to read, and then fail to apply—our Lord remarks on how the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them, and adds 'It shall not be so among you'. It is hard to reconcile such a verse with any suggestion that the rôle of the Apostle, or the Bishop, or the elder, was to be judicial other than in exceptional circumstances. His primary rôle was to serve, not to rule, and not to judge.

### **The Attitude of the Reformers**

If discipline did not occupy a primary place in the New Testament, neither did it occupy a primary place in the thinking of the Reformers. Luther initially was concerned to identify the Church with the Word of God—

Where the Word is, there is faith; and where faith is, there is the true Church<sup>2</sup>

Calvin, though essentially in agreement tended to lay some emphasis on matters relevant to discipline. In the first edition of the Institutes

## Churchman

(1536) he cited as marks of the Church profession of faith and exemplary life and the sacraments: and in 1539 in controversy with Caroli, mentioned profession of faith, sacraments and discipline: but his more considered view did not make discipline one of the essential marks of the Church. Discipline belonged to the *bene esse* rather than to the *esse* of the Church.

More extreme views were, it is true, held by the Puritans and Anabaptists and others: so that Bucer could say in 1538

There cannot be a Church without excommunication<sup>3</sup>

but this was not reflected in the thinking of the mainstream Reformers. In Scotland, John Knox wrote

The nottis, signes, and assured tokenis whairby the immaculate spouse of Christ Jesus is knawin from that horrible harlote the Kirk malignant are trew preaching of the word of God . . . rycht administracioun of the sacramentis . . . Ecclesiasticall discipline uprightlie ministered<sup>4</sup>

In England, Bishop Ridley added a fourth quality

The marks whereby this Church is known unto me in this dark world and in the midst of this crooked and froward generation are these—the sincere preaching of God's word; the due administration of the sacraments; charity; and the faithful observing of ecclesiastical discipline according to the word of God<sup>5</sup>

while Parker's Eleven Articles of 1559 stated

that Church to be the spouse of Christ, wherein the word of God is truly taught, the sacraments duly administered according to Christ's institution, and the authority of the keys duly used.

and the *Book of Homilies* (the second part of the Homily for Whitsunday) declares

The true Church . . . hath always three notes or marks whereby it is known: pure and sound doctrine; the sacraments administered according to Christ's holy institution; and the right use of ecclesiastical discipline.

Some later reformers, and Richard Hooker in particular, tended to define the visible Church more empirically, laying emphasis on outward profession of faith, and accepting that in the visible Church was inherently a mixed and imperfect society. They laid less emphasis on the 'marks of the Church': but to them also, as to most of the Reformers (Puritans and their allies apart) discipline was still

regarded as highly desirable for the health of the Church, even if not in the strictest sense essential.

The early Church had no laws on which to base discipline other than the injunctions of Scripture—to which might possibly be added any rules agreed by each local Church. By the fourth century various Councils had met, partly in order to facilitate consistent treatment of those who had apostatized under persecution, and wished to be received back into the Church. The rules made by the Councils came to be called Canons, but these were fast outnumbered by decrees emanating from Rome, as it sought to establish the authority of the papacy. Until the Reformation the law of the Church was somewhat confused, and was found at one time or another in penitentials or more usually in various collections of the Canons, of papal decrees, and of papal codes—further confused since some of the collections contained deliberate alterations.

With the repudiation of the papal authority at the Reformation, the law of the Church of England, and the system of courts had to be drastically reformed, and eventually the Canons of 1603 were produced: although other parts of the law were in fact changed by the Articles, by the *Book of Common Prayer*, by Act of Parliament and by Royal Injunctions.

Not less important than the changes in law was the method of enforcement that the Reformers chose, giving power to the civil authority. For they held the doctrine of the 'godly Prince' or magistrate, modelled on the kings of Old Testament Israel, and of a single society which was to be a Christian Commonwealth. Professor Norman Sykes wrote

At this distance of time amid such different conditions of ecclesiastical and political development, the Reformation apotheosis of 'the godly prince' strikes an unfamiliar, if not actually uncongenial, note on our ears; and there is a strong resultant tendency to discount the prominence and centrality of this theme in the theology no less than the ecclesiology of the sixteenth century. Yet there can be no doubt that the rediscovery in the historical books of the Old Testament of the 'godly prince', and the argument therefrom *a fortiori* to the authority of the Christian sovereign, was one of the most important and significant themes of the Reformers, alike Lutheran, Calvinist and Anglican.<sup>6</sup>

For the Reformers were convinced that God ruled His people both through Church and State, and that kings no less than prelates were appointed to be His agents and were responsible to Him. Not only were they responsible, but they were essentially under His control. As the *Book of Common Prayer's* second Communion collect puts it

we are taught by thy holy Word, that the hearts of Kings are in thy rule and governance, and that thou dost dispose and turn them as it seemeth

best to thy godly wisdom:

The modern tendency to regard everything unchurchy as secular, to regard God, in effect, as a clergyman, to think of the State and Government (and anything lay) as neutral or hostile, rather than as a field wherein Christian vocation (no less real than vocation to the priesthood) may be exercised is less worthy, and less Scriptural, than the vision which the Reformers held before them. It is not a vision that can be taken lightly by those who remember that God could call even the heathen Cyrus His servant, and who hold a Gospel that teaches that to their God every one of us shall give account: for when we deny men are to act as God's agents, then we deny that accountability.

The stress the Reformers laid in assigning to the civil authorities a rôle in the enforcement of Church law through the courts was in keeping with another fundamental feature of the Reformers' theology which we have today largely forgotten. As Paul Avis writes

. . . the Reformation had been an attempt to throw off clerical domination and to give to the laity a significant share in the government of the Church. Luther had appealed to the nobility of the German nation in 1520 as members of the universal priesthood to take in hand the reform of the Church. The course of the English Reformation under Henry VIII was decisively influenced by Henry's consistent anticlericalism. The Royal Supremacy was opposed both by catholics such as Thomas More and puritans such as Cartwright precisely because it made a layman head of the Church. When, under Elizabeth, Parliament was brought in to share, as it were, the Supremacy, the caesaro-papism of Henry gave way to the ascendancy of the laity. The Supremacy of Henry had been largely a personal attribute which Parliament had been merely called upon to endorse: that of Elizabeth was a corporate supremacy of the lay members of the Church of England represented by the Queen-in-Parliament.<sup>7</sup>

So the Reformers gave to us a heritage of public contending for the Truth: of doctrine asserted in the Articles, in the Form of Subscription, and in the *Book of Common Prayer*: of the Canons of 1603: and of a court system wherein the laity, the Church as a whole, had a significant rôle.

### **Discipline in the Church Today**

The heritage that we and our forefathers received from the Reformers has been materially altered, mostly within the present century. First, pressure on Parliamentary time, and agitation from some churchmen, led to Parliament in effect delegating its powers in church legislation to the Church Assembly, set up in 1919, and then succeeded by the General Synod in 1970: though Parliament retains

the power of veto. Secondly, the Church Assembly and Convocations, reacting to the Report of the Archbishops' Commission on Canon Law which reported in 1947 carried out in the 1950s an extensive revision of the Canons. Much of this was long overdue and unobjectionable: but the opportunity was taken also to make changes which represented a retreat from Reformation and Biblical theology. Thirdly, the constitution of Church courts has been changed by the Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction Measure, and in particular the rôle of the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council as final Court of Appeal has been ended, and other changes made to which there will be later reference. Fourthly, the nature of the assent given to the Thirty-nine Articles by the clergy has been weakened, first by requiring only general assent, and then by the revised form of subscription introduced in 1974/5: which still requires assent, but makes it less obvious that it does so. Fifthly, the rôle of the *Book of Common Prayer* in defining doctrine, although still given lip-service, has been weakened by the doctrinal changes (surely illegal under the 1974 Worship and Doctrine Measure) contained in the *Alternative Service Book*.

Meanwhile the creation of the Lambeth Conference, its unreformed emphasis on the episcopate in the Lambeth Quadrilateral, the great increases in episcopal patronage, the recent emphasis on episcopal collegiality, and (less directly) the setting up of the Anglican Consultative Council are all examples of a tendency, and more than a tendency, for the re-assertion of clerical and episcopal domination in the church, and a (possibly) unconscious desire of prelates 'to concentrate power in their own hands. To be sure, we have the structure of synodical government, which (*pace* Dr. Bennett) does exercise some real power, and to which clergy and laity contribute: but the late Dr. Bennett was surely right when he wrote in his *Crockford's Preface*

The reality is that beside the system of synods, with their elections, debates and votes, there exists another system of episcopal executive authority, the characteristics of which are deference, patronage and self-recruitment. It is the influence of the House of Bishops which over the last five years has increased and is now increasing. Though the diocesan bishops often give the impression of being harassed and over-worked men, oppressed by their engagement diaries and their piles of correspondence, their actual power and patronage are recognised by all their clergy. In most dioceses, behind the facade of Bishop's Council, synod, boards and committees, there exists a wholly unelected group, usually called 'the staff meeting', which actually runs the diocese. It consists of the diocesan, the suffragans, the archdeacons and other officials, and it unifies executive action.

Nowhere is this assumption of episcopal power more obvious than

in respect of discipline: for the reforms of church laws and courts in recent years have had one common feature: in order to protect clergy from malicious or frivolous prosecution—in itself a wholly laudable aim—legal proceedings are now almost invariably subject to episcopal veto. Administration of discipline has become a matter reserved, in effect, to the bishops alone. Court proceedings are now, for better or worse, rare: though how far this is because bishops actually use their veto; how far it is because ordinary people have lost faith in the system on account of the episcopal veto; or how far it is because other, less cumbersome and public, means are being used is not entirely clear.

However the bishops have a framework in which discipline can be exercised with their consent or at their behest. They control who should be ordained. They can exercise appreciable influence on a clergyman's career by virtue, for instance, of their powers of patronage. Legal action can be taken where there has been an offence against ecclesiastical law. That can include conduct unbecoming the office and work of a clerk in holy orders, or serious, persistent and continuous neglect of duty. The Court can order deprivation, inhibition, suspension, monition, or rebuke of the accused if found guilty. Under a relatively recent but little used Measure action can also be taken to remove a clergyman from a benefice where there is a serious breakdown of the pastoral relationship between him and his parishioners, or where he, by reason of age, or infirmity of mind or body cannot adequately discharge his duties. As regards the laity the rubric at the start of the *Book of Common Prayer* Communion Service has been amended (with the Canons) so that whereas before a clergyman could refuse Communion to an 'open and notorious evil liver', those who had wronged their neighbours, or those 'betwixt whom he perceived malice and hatred to reign'—and then tell the Ordinary within 14 days: now he must (except in cases of grave and immediate scandal) first tell the Ordinary, and therein obey his order and direction.

With such powers in such distinguished hands, why then is there current concern over discipline in the Church? Basically I believe it is because recent events have brought to public notice a number of only partly related facets of the present administration of discipline that are unsatisfactory. Let me cite six such:

1. At least one of the fifteen bishops who voted against taking 'appropriate' disciplinary action in cases of sexual immorality of the clergy did so for the reason that he did not want his clergy to associate him with discipline, but wished to encourage them to be able to talk freely with him in a pastoral—not disciplinary—setting. His motives, if not his voting, are to be applauded. If our earlier examination of the

New Testament teaching was anywhere near right, discipline ought to be administered by the Church as a whole, not just by the Bishop. The best of the bishops are now embarrassed by the powers which they have acquired.

2. The bishops collectively have shown themselves unwilling or unable to deal satisfactorily with the problems which have been caused by some of the wilder utterances of the Bishop of Durham. Their report *The Nature of Christian Belief* though mainly orthodox, fudged the issue, and the bishops are perceived as having simply closed ranks and taken refuge in some ambiguity. Their line has since been decisively rejected by both the House of Clergy and the House of Laity of the General Synod. The Bishops' fudge does not have the *consensus fidelium*. If the bishops are seen to put 'collegiality' before testimony to the truth, they should not wonder if their utterances are sometimes not taken very seriously. Would that we had bishops with the courage of the Bishop of Durham to break ranks, but to do so to proclaim Biblical Truth, rather than academic trendiness and confusion!

3. The homosexuality issue has brought to the public notice the fact that a few of the bishops have been knowingly ordaining men who openly admit to being 'practising' homosexuals. No one wants a witch-hunt especially in a matter where action should not be taken on the basis of gossip or mere suspicion: but ordaining such men is a clear breach of Canon C 4: and it brings a slur on the good name of the great majority of moral clergy. Such action by a few bishops in all probability ensures further scandals in years to come. Many bishops have responded to the situation well: but the refusal to date of the House of Bishops corporately to give satisfactory assurances, or to amend the clearly unsatisfactory guidelines given to Bishop's Selectors, seem to many sufficient proof that discipline is not in safe hands. The House of Bishops' vote on David Holloway's 'discipline' amendment in the Synod confirms this view.

4. Bishops frequently seek to exercise discipline of the clergy in private, away from public gaze and the eyes of the media—for no one wishes church scandals to be splashed on the pages of the more sensational and less accurate press. But, while the actual administration of discipline may sometimes be better done in private (provided justice does not suffer as a result) the fact that it is being administered should certainly be made public. One of the least satisfactory features of the current situation is that ordinary church members have very imperfect knowledge of what is or is not being done. The bishops owe it to the Church to make clear the principles on which they are

acting, or on which they refrain from acting. It is not enough for them to say 'Trust us': they have to show that they are acting responsibly, both with firmness and with compassion, to uphold New Testament standards.

5. Some remarks made by bishops since the homosexuality vote have seemed to indicate that a very significant part of their time is taken up with discipline cases. If that is so, something surely is wrong, and the causes need to be identified and put right. Prevention is always better than cure. It is common knowledge that when the rules are constantly varied and inconsistently enforced, discipline problems greatly increase. When rules are clearly stated, and firmly, consistently, and charitably enforced, the problems markedly decrease. Is it the bishops' failure to do just that that is at the root of the problem?

6. There seems to be no formal procedure generally available between private advice and pressure from the bishop, and full-scale court procedure: there is little to correspond to our Lord's 'Take two or three others with you'. Courts and their associated procedures may be necessary if a man's livelihood is at risk: but a simpler procedure used in good time might well prevent an unfortunate situation developing. Do we not exaggerate problems by our practice of ordaining for life at a comparatively early age? One may well doubt if the indelibility of orders has any Scriptural warrant: one must certainly doubt that the 'elder' of the New Testament was often in his early twenties!

But behind these specific and varied reasons for unease about the present state of discipline in the church is a deeper worry. If any society, institution or community is to enjoy a substantially trouble-free and disciplined life together, it is a necessary pre-requisite that that society should have high standards of integrity, and respect for the rules by which it is to be governed. Belief by any that they are above the law is ultimately fatal to the peace and harmony of that society.

In place of these high standards, and respect for the law, the Church of England suffers from a deep-seated malaise. The Oxford Movement, for all its virtues (for it has been the spiritual home of some men of undoubted faith and godliness) was never fully at home in the reformed Church of England, and wrestled with the problems of assent to Articles of Religion that were more Scriptural than some of their own tenets. It taught its followers to give assent in a sense other than that which was plainly and legally required. The liberals likewise give verbal assent to a Scripture-based faith that they frankly do not hold: for they exalt reason to the point where they pick and choose those bits of Scripture which they deign to agree with, and reject the rest. There is a church over, not under, the Word of God:

and it is not the church that the New Testament sets as our pattern. One cannot give assent to Articles—under any formula—if one generally dissents from them. Even our Bishops and Theological Colleges have sometimes been carried away and encouraged ordinands not to take their Ordination vows too seriously. They did not so learn Christ, who said ‘Let your yea be yea.’

Pressure from Anglo-catholics and Liberals to ease the problem by modifying the Form of Subscription led to the changes made in 1974/5: and this might well have been a proper course of action had the revised Form been properly respected, but no attempt seems to have been made to treat the vows with any more respect than before.

The lack of respect for the Form of Clerical Subscription soon spread to other aspects of Church law. When the 1928 deposited book was rejected by many of the laity of the Church Assembly (where it had less than the now required two-thirds majority) and more particularly by the laity in Parliament, the Bishops behaved like spoilt children and made it clear that they would support those clergy who broke the law. Effectively they were denying to the laity any effective place in law-making. Much of the present disorder in the Church of England can be traced back to that wholly indefensible decision. Bishops even today threaten to act as if they were above the Law, or if the authority for the law lay in them rather than in the whole Church. If I understand correctly an answer to a question given at the 1988 February Group of Sessions of the General Synod, they are contemplating ‘authorizing’ under Canon B.5 Section 4 forms of service for which that section is clearly not designed. The Canon is made under the *Worship and Doctrine Measure*, and they appear to wish to authorize forms of service, at least one of which has been lawfully refused approval under Clause 3 of that same Measure. Is this an unintentional oversight, or does it reflect a considered attitude of mind on the part of the Bishops? If the latter, then they are making their final court of Appeal, not the Judicial Committee, but Bishop Humpty Dumpty with the dictum ‘When I use a word it means what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less’. If they continue so to act they make themselves not the focus of unity, but the source of further disorder. If they act with contempt for the law which they themselves have helped to make, do they not call in question their fitness to have the stranglehold on discipline that they have taken or been given in the last fifty years? No wonder that loyal Church laity, finding themselves robbed of the Church of their fathers, have started with increasing numbers to vote with their feet!

It is not just a question of law, and of respect for it—though these are essential if things are to be done ‘decently and in order’. There is a question of integrity at stake—of men meaning what they say at solemn moments of ordination and consecration: and of them honouring those pledges, rather than deceiving or half-deceiving the

Church in a manner too reminiscent of Ananias and Sapphira for comfort. We have a lot to do in the Church of England to put our own house in order again before we can with integrity lecture the politicians about morality. There really is some excuse for those who look at the present situation and see a similarity with the days of Jeremiah—

An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land,  
The prophets prophesy with a lie,  
The priests applauded with their hands,  
and My people love to have it so,  
but what will you do when the end comes? (Jer.5. 30–31)

But we should not be too complacent in making such strong criticism. It used to be the mark of Evangelicalism that it was strong on keeping the Law—sometimes even with a Pharisaic touch. But now this can no longer universally be said. I well recall listening to one of the staff of an ‘evangelical’ theological college telling young people at a crowded Youth Rally, with obvious enthusiasm, to get their clergy to ‘drive a coach and horses’ through the predecessor of the *Worship and Doctrine Measure*. Evangelical churches, far from being the most law-abiding, are now in some cases the most lawless. They think they can do what they like, as long as they can hang it on some text of Scripture wrested from its literary and historic context. They are far more blame-worthy than the bishops, the Anglo-catholics or the liberals—for they, of all people, should have known better. We need respect for the law, and integrity, first and foremost, in our own back-yard. Let us, as a first priority, show what it really means to be a Church under the Word of God. To be sure, it means, for a start, that Evangelicals, if they are true to that name, should stop pleasing themselves.

### **What about the Laity?**

Our attention has been focused largely upon the discipline of the clergy: for present Church law is only enforceable against them, plus perhaps a few laity such as officers of Church courts—provided one excepts the question of refusing communion according to the *Book of Common Prayer* Communion rubric. But responsibility and power go together: and in the present climate where there is at least lip-service given to a fuller rôle for the laity in the life of the Church, the question arises as to how far discipline of the laity ought also to be examined.

It seems to me that the case for such is unanswerable: appropriate discipline should also apply at least to all laity who hold any kind of church office—churchwardens, Readers, members of Church Councils and the like. But if discipline is to be extended to the laity, the

right of the laity to take their full part in the administration of discipline is also unanswerable: and the first should be conditional upon the second.

However if this is done it needs to be done with care. The *Book of Common Prayer* rubric as I have previously explained, used to put the power to refuse communion in the hands of the local clergyman: the revised one tells him normally first to consult the bishop. It is not hard to think of situations where one way would be the better, and of others where the reverse would be true. But should not the local power be in the hands of the 'two or three'—the clergyman working with two or three of his senior laity? It would guard against the bishop taking decisions having heard only half the story; and it would guard against the known eccentricity of a minority of Incumbents. I remember having the slightly unusual experience of being denounced from the pulpit one Sunday (for something which in fact I had not done—though on reflection it was quite a good idea) and then being invited by the same Vicar to preach from the same pulpit the following Sunday morning!

It has also to be done with some consistency. The situation of some years ago when almost the only 'sin' which resulted in people being refused communion was remarriage after divorce was utterly ridiculous. It led one senior Bishop (alas we have none like him now!) to remark with his tongue in his cheek that since communion was refused if one remarried after divorce, but not if one was convicted of murder, it was clear that the teaching of the Church was that if you did not get on with your wife you should bump her off rather than divorce her! It was equally ridiculous where the same sanction was applied for a period of six months. If remarriage is a sin which requires repentance, on what grounds do we imply that it ceases to be so after such a period? But if discipline is to be administered with consistency it requires great care to ensure that objective Biblical standards are used, and not subjective ones.

There is a further consideration which affects the laity. If those who hold some kind of office are subject to discipline, administered by representatives of the whole Church, as a result of which they may lose the authority to exercise that office, then the corollary is that steps should also be taken to prevent the present *laissez-faire* attitude wherein those without authority frequently do the work which strictly requires such authorization. In days when greater lay activity is supposed to be encouraged, that will no doubt require a radical review of the ways authorization is given, and the basis for such authorization.

### **What is Now Required?**

If the foregoing is anywhere near the mark, then some of the areas where action now needs to be taken begin to emerge, even if they are certainly not the whole story.

1. We have first to put our own house in order, and somehow persuade those who today are so keen to market themselves under the label 'evangelical' that that demands high integrity, a high regard for both the spirit and the letter of the law, and disciplined subjection to the Word of God.

2. We need to put pressure on the House of Bishops to act within the Law, and for them collectively and publicly to show determination consistently to uphold the present Law of the Church. So long as the law is unchanged, that must include proper administration of discipline whether carried out in public or in private.

3. Under present law disciplinary power is in the hands of the bishops, and to obtain all necessary action requires bishops with a somewhat different, and more traditional, outlook, than the present seriously unbalanced Bench. There is little hope that such will be produced by the discredited and inherently hierarchical Crown Appointments Commission. Has not the time come for loyal Churchmen to ask the Prime Minister, and through her the Sovereign, to reassert the traditional post-Reformation rôle of the laity in Episcopal appointments—taken from them without proper consultation: and to refuse to nominate those who cannot take their consecration vows with integrity, or are not sincerely pledged to uphold the law and to work under the law? It would not be the first time in the history of God's people if the Princes and the People put right the errors of the Priests! The Church has been hi-jacked by the Liberals: many ordinary Christians of the country want their Church back!

4. In the longer term we need to seek reform of the law so that bishops are set free to fulfil a mainly pastoral rôle towards the clergy. Discipline should be administered by persons or bodies representative of the whole Church, including bishops, clergy and laity, but with a predominant lay element in a Church which is predominantly lay.

5. Other reforms in the administration of discipline should include the introduction of something intermediate between private monition and full-scale court proceedings: and the extension of well-considered discipline to lay office holders.

6. There is need to review methods of selecting ordinands, methods of training them, and the age and terms under which they are appointed to office.

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**NOTES**

- 1 This paper was delivered at Church Society's Spring Conference 1988, held at Swanwick, Derbyshire under the title: 'The Church under the Word of God'.
- 2 D. Martin Luther's Werke (Weimar, 1883- ).
- 3 D. Wright, ed., *Commonplaces of Martin Bucer* (Appleford, 1972) p.31.
- 4 Knox, *Works*, ed. Laing (Edinburgh, 1846), Vol.4, pp.266f.; Vol.2, p.110.
- 5 Parker Society edition of the works of Nicholas Ridley (Cambridge University Press 1841) p. 123.
- 6 Norman Sykes, *Old Priest and New Presbyter* (Cambridge, 1956) p.2.
- 7 Paul D.L. Avis, *The Church in the Theology of the Reformers*, Marshall Morgan & Scott, 1981, pp.135-6.