

The Lambeth Conference: Jewish-Christian Guidelines

DAVID HARLEY

'The Lambeth Conference of 400 Anglican bishops is to be urged to repudiate attempts to convert Jews to Christianity'.

So wrote Clifford Longley in the Times on July 11th 1988 commenting on remarks made by the Bishop of Oxford, the Right Reverend Richard Harries. Dr Harries was chairman of the group which prepared the official draft for a declaration on behalf of the world-wide Anglican Communion. This draft entitled *Jewish-Christian Guidelines for the Anglican Communion* was presented to the Lambeth Conference for its approval.

In the event the report was not accepted by the Bishops in its original form. It was considerably reduced and significantly altered. Those alterations are important as they show what the Bishops were not prepared to approve as well as what they were prepared to accept.

The question needs to be asked why the Lambeth Bishops did not accept the original draft and what significant changes were made. In the first place one must assume that the guidelines in their initial form were not perceived as being truly representative of those who met at Canterbury. It is legitimate to ask how representative the group was that prepared this draft for a declaration on behalf of the worldwide Anglican Communion. Did it include the main streams of tradition and theological thought within Anglicanism?

Did it include a Jewish Christian, of whom there are increasing numbers within Anglican Churches and in the ordained ministry? Surely they have something of importance to contribute in this area. Similarly it may be asked whether there were any in the drafting committee who had had experience in the field of Christian witness to the Jewish people. Why, for example, was an invitation not given to the General Director of CMJ, the Church's Ministry among the Jews, one of the oldest of our Anglican Societies and one which exists for the purpose of promoting sensitive witness to the Jewish people? If groups are set up to draft statements on behalf of Anglicans, it is reasonable that they honestly reflect the variety of opinion within the communion rather than the narrow perspective of one group.

Space does not allow for a fuller comparison between the original and the revised drafts. But I would like to pick out three alterations that were made to the text that are particularly significant.

First, the original document contained the statement that the Christian church in its concern for the Jewish people 'will firmly reject any form of proselytising, which attempts to convert individual Jews to Christianity'. This statement was omitted in the revised draft and in its place recognition was given to the fact that within the Church there is a variety of attitudes towards Judaism. It was acknowledged that there are some Christians who have a 'particular vocation and responsibility to share their faith with Jews' and who pray 'that Jews, without giving up their Jewishness, will find their fulfilment in Jesus the Messiah'.

The second significant omission was that of a phrase quoted in the article in the Times. There we were informed that the guidelines would call on Anglicans to pray that Jews should 'be faithful to the Torah which God has given them'. This did not appear in the final document, and it may have been its ambiguity which led to its omission. The New Testament makes it abundantly clear that it is not possible for anyone by faithful adherence to the Torah to render themselves acceptable to God. It is difficult to see how Christians could be urged to pray along lines that contradict the core of apostolic teaching - that we are saved by grace not by work.

The original guidelines suggested that Matthew, John and Luke were guilty of a 'negative attitude towards Jews and Judaism.' It is a relief to see that these three evangelists, at least 2 of whom were themselves Jews, are no longer accused of anti-semitism and that this statement now reads 'Even the gospels have, at times, been used to malign and denigrate the Jewish people'.

We have seen that the Bishops refused

- (a) to repudiate attempts to convert Jews
- (b) to imply that Jewish people can be saved through faithfulness to the Torah
- (c) to accept the common misconception that the New Testament is antisemitic.

The report which was eventually endorsed in principle at Canterbury does contain a great deal of valuable advice for Christians in their attitudes towards and relationships with Jewish people. We are encouraged to appreciate Judaism as a living faith, to learn from the great traditions of its rabbis, philosophers and theologians. We are warned against misrepresenting Judaism or misunderstanding what it means to be a Jew. There is a salutary reminder too of how the church has persistently persecuted the Jews and how church leaders, preachers and teachers have disseminated anti-Jewish propaganda. The report also focuses on the 'special bond and affinity' Christianity has with Judaism. Jesus was a Jew. The Jewish Bible forms the major part of the Christian Scriptures. The God in whom Christians believe as the Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ is also the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Further, the report adds 'Christians and Jews share one hope, which is for the realisation of God's Kingdom on earth' (though of course this begs the very large question as to what we mean by the Kingdom).

Christians and Jews do indeed have very much in common. There is a special relationship, a unique bond between them. We are indebted to the Bishop of Oxford and his committee for reminding the Anglican Communion of the special bond and offering helpful guidelines on the way Christians should relate to Jewish people.

Yet even in the final draft there are some statements which leave much to be desired. First there is the inference that those who want to witness to Jewish people are extremists. They are described as being 'at one pole' of the church's spectrum, as if they are on the outer perimeter of the church's life. I question whether such a suggestion is accurate in the light of the growing influence on Evangelicals within the Church of England and of the fact that 1600 parishes support the work of CMJ.

Secondly the report falls into the trap of using language that is emotive and inadequately defined. For example, we are encouraged to condemn all 'aggressive and manipulative attempts to convert'. Well of course we would, wouldn't we? But what exactly is meant by those phrases and who are the people who are supposed to be behaving in this way?

A few weeks ago a member of the Jewish community visited CMJ's Bible Come to Life Exhibition. There they found a piece of literature which included a prayer that Jewish people might find their Messiah. The Jewish Chronicle was immediately informed of the existence of this prayer and carried a front page article the following week condemning such aggressive and manipulative evangelism! If there is to be useful discussion in this sensitive area there must be less emotive language and a greater clarification of terminology.

But there is something far more fundamental at stake here – that is the uniqueness of Christ and his gospel. It is a question of the greatest importance about which the church must make up her mind, both with regard to Jews and with regard to those of other faiths. Anglicans must decide whether they will uphold the traditional teaching of the faith as it has been over two thousand years or whether they will adopt some new doctrine and invent a smaller 'Christ', a Christ who is not the Saviour of the Jews, or the Muslims, or the Hindus or the Buddhists or those who follow the traditional religions of their ancestors.

It is our basic Christology that is being challenged and we need to look again at the apostolic witness as to who Christ was and what he did. If we do invent a smaller Christ who is neither God incarnate nor Messiah of Israel we can no longer pretend that we are holding to the apostolic faith. And if we proclaim that Jesus is no longer the Saviour of the Jews we may discover that we have created a Jesus who can no longer save anyone.

Of course it is true that those who seek to share the good news of Jesus with Jewish people must do so with great cultural sensitivity and with an awareness of the past. It is appropriate that they recognise the atrocities performed by Christians against Jews and seek their forgiveness. It is also the case that Jews have much to teach Christians both in life-style and in their understanding of God. Their observance of the Sabbath as a day that is

holy to the Lord, their sense of loyalty to both family and community, their celebration of life as a gift from the Creator – there are just some of the hallmarks of Jewish faith and life that could enrich the Christian Church and draw it closer to biblical ideals. It is equally important for Christians to go on learning more about Judaism both out of respect for their Jewish neighbours and out of a desire to rediscover their religious roots. Finally it is incumbent on the Christian Church to identify with the Jewish community in its struggle against prejudice and to fight against every form of anti-Semitism.

In all these ways there is a rightful place for dialogue, for listening, for sharing and for working together. But that must not mean (and if we are to be true to the apostolic faith it cannot mean) that we then ignore the Lord's command to share the gospel with all the world including the Jewish people. Dialogue and evangelism should not be seen as alternatives that are diametrically opposed but as two interrelated facets of the church's mission. To refuse dialogue is to ignore the past and to fail the treat Jews with respect. To refuse to evangelise is to call in to question the essential validity of the gospel.

Two articles that appeared recently in national newspapers drew attention to both the dilemma and the responsibility that the church faces. They both pinpointed the fact that Christians must decide whether they actually do believe the historic faith or not. The first was written by Clifford Longley (*The Times*, July 19th 1988):

In the main the Christian churches do believe they have a duty to preach their Gospel, to Christians, Jews, Muslims and everyone – because they believe it is true, and because they believe no one is excluded from the right to bear the truth. Forced conversions are abhorrent, of course, so are manipulative and deceitful missionary tactics. But to ask the churches to agree that Christian teaching is not in any circumstances to be offered to Jews, is equivalent to asking them to agree that the teaching is not true at all – or that Jews are uniquely not allowed to hear it, which would be a doctrine with very objectionable implications that Jews themselves would hardly welcome

The second appeared in *The Guardian* on December 1st, 1988 and was written by Tony Higton.

Recently some of the liberal establishment have come up with the amazing inanity that to evangelise Jewish people, even sensitively, is to be anti-Semitic. But if we believe Christ is the only way of salvation, then not to see (respectfully and sensitively) to win Jewish people to Christ is the ultimate act of anti-Semitism. In fact not to encourage everyone to make a faith commitment to Christ is supremely uncaring. It is to deny the Faith.

The Revd David Harley is Principal of All Nations Christian College, Ware.