The Pattern of Church History: The Challenge and the Spur

By G. C. B. Davies

'NOW these things that happened to our ancestors are illustrations of the way in which God works, and they were written down to be a warning to us who are the heirs of the ages which have gone before us.'[1] This dictum of St. Paul embodies two important assertions; first, that the study of history begins by a recognition that significant events have taken place, so stressing factual accuracy; and secondly, that these events have lessons to teach by way of warning or encouragement to those who come after. If this is true of the study of a nation's history (as St. Paul was indicating to the Christians of Corinth), it is no less true of the study of Church history for Christians of the present day. It is the purpose of this article to suggest some of the crucial periods and subjects to be studied in the history of the Christian Church, as a challenge to Christian endeavour, and a spur to further reading.

The first four centuries of Church history may appear so remote in time as to be of mere academic interest to the average churchgoer, unless he intends to make a specialist study as a hobby or for examination purposes at some future date. One of the finest practical justifications for a knowledge of this period, however, was given by the late Dorothy Sayers in an address to teachers during the war years. In her usual cogent style, she argued that the Church's early preoccupation with the nature and divinity of Christ has a modern relevance which is too often unrecognised. To say that Jesus Christ was God and man suggests that He was a mysterious hybrid creature, having nothing in common with the average John Smith. This takes us into the heart of the Nestorian controversy (or that of a form of Arianism), and though in danger of plunging into deep theological terminology, and risking the heresy of the Patripassians, we must unite with Athanasius to assure John Smith that the God who lived and died in the world, and who therefore has the best possible reason for understanding John Smith's troubles, was the God who made the world. 'But,' John Smith objects, 'God can't suffer like you and me, and it's no use suggesting that we are to try and be like Christ : that's all nonsense—we can't be God, and it's silly to ask us to try.' This able exposition of the Eutychian heresy can scarcely be dismissed as 'interesting only to theologians', since it interests John Smith to the point of irritation. We are therefore forced to involve ourselves further in dogmatic theology, and insist that Christ is 'perfect God and perfect man'; that is to say, 'altogether God and altogether man', or God and man at the same time, completely and in every respect. But John Smith may continue his argument along these lines: 'This leaves me cold; Christ knew that He could stop His sufferings and human life whenever He liked, so His pretending to be a man was

mere play-acting. And how about His being tempted? He wouldn't *want* to do wrong if He was God.' John Smith is now well on the way to becoming a convinced Apollinarian, and we have to insist that Christ possessed 'a reasonable soul' as well as 'human flesh'; we must admit the limitations of knowledge and intellect, supposing a human will liable to genuine temptation, and insist that He was 'equal to the Father as touching His Godhead, *and inferior to the Father as touching His manhood*'. Complicated as the theology is, Mr. John Smith—the average man who thinks at all about Christian teaching and its relevance today—has walked right into the heart of the Athanasian Creed, and we are bound to follow him. This, however, we can do with assurance only if we have some understanding of the issues at stake in the pronouncements of the first four General Councils at Nicea, Constantinople, Ephesus and Chalcedon in the fourth and fifth centuries.[2]

The overthrow of the Roman empire in the fifth century left the Christian Church as the only co-ordinating and civilising influence in Europe during the succeeding three centuries. In this period, the monasteries were the main centres of Christian witness, preserving and teaching the truth, and providing oases of learning and culture. Too often the importance of their work at this critical time is forgotten, and the labours of men such as Benedict of Nursia underestimated. But it was from the monasteries that Aidan and Columba went forth on evangelising missions (to mention only two who deeply influenced the northern part of Britain), and revived Christianity when its fortunes in this country were at a low ebb. Nor should the revival of monasticism on the continent be neglected; in the tenth, eleventh and twelfth centuries, Odo at Cluny and St. Bernard at Clairvaux greatly added to the spiritual life of the Church, and enhanced its reputation for devotion, education, and care of the sick and poor.

The tangled story of the Crusades provides an unedifying spectacle of a high ideal (the recovery of the holy places in Palestine from the control of the Turks) being degraded into an opportunity for the exploitation of selfish ambitions by nations and individuals. The main results of the Crusades were largely irrelevant to their original intentions, but must not therefore be dismissed as unimportant. Commerce between Europe and the East was increased, and new trade routes were opened. Medicine and chemistry were affected by new knowledge imported through contact with eastern customs. On the religious side, the cult of devotion to the Virgin Mary was introduced to the West, and the building of many Lady Chapels in cathedrals and older parish churches dates from this period. Indirectly the influence of the Crusades can hardly be overestimated, and they played no small part in preparing the ground for the Renaissance.

This massive intellectual flowering of the human spirit in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries made its greatest impact in the field of art and literature. The movement is an excellent example of the dangers of attempting to restrict the study of Church history to narrowly ecclesiastical themes, for it affected the fortunes of Christianity in many different ways, and with far-reaching results. By reviving the study of the classics, it exposed some of the false pretensions of the Church, as in the claims of the canon lawyers, while

the impulse to Wycliffe and his followers to prepare a translation of the Bible in English led to an increasing realisation of the superstitious accretions to medieval Christianity. At the same time, the literary attacks on the papacy by Dante and Marsilius of Padua, and the continuing struggle for power between the Empire and the papacy, led to a weakening of papal control and undermining of papal authority at both political and spiritual levels. The climax of this intellectual revival coincided in the fifteenth century with a succession of notoriously disreputable popes, culminating in the infamous Borgias. Yet the Conciliar movement, a valiant attempt to reform the Church and papacy from within, revealed both the cunning of papal efforts to cling on to existing privileges, and the limitations of available pressures to secure the removal of economic and ecclesiastical abuses. The disillusionment consequent upon this failure was one element in the many causes of the Reformation of the sixteenth century. But it is important that those who tend to regard the Reformation only in terms of doctrinal change, and the breaking of control by Roman pontiffs, should also study the political and economic factors which brought that measure of public support for reform without which it could never have been successful. If popular mysticism was one of the main currents in the stream of events which led to the Reformation, discontent with the working of canon law, with the burden of papal taxation, and with monastic degeneracy were other factors not to be forgotten.

But with this caveat, the fact remains that the Reformation could hardly have taken the form it did apart from the titanic figures of Luther and Calvin. 'Luther was a man of the people and fought to bring true religion to the hearts and the homes of the people; to show them that religion was not the clerical, ecclesiastical, ritual act performed in church, but the appropriation of a Gospel into the life.'[3] The insistence upon the doctrine of justification by faith, and of man's personal relationship with God through Christ as revealed by Holy Scripture—this was the axe which cut at the roots of medieval ecclesiasticism. But the preaching of this doctrine found favour with many German princes who wished to throw off the burdens of papal control; hence the political support called forth by Luther's famous protest.

Calvin was concerned with the construction of new modes of power. For him, what was needed was the authority of a rightly called and purified ministry, and his break with the Church was rather over his views on Church order than on strictly theological issues. Important though his emphasis on predestination might be, his evolution of the presbyterian system of Church government remains his most significant contribution to the movement for reform. 'The true source of Calvin's authority was in himself. Uncompromising though he might be, he pursued with a single mind what he believed to be the truth: he extorted that reluctant admiration and discipleship which is given to consistency, to courage and to decisiveness.'[4] Such men are not popular; they call forth respect and veneration rather than affection. But without the granite resistance and unshakable convictions of Calvinism, the history of the reformed Churches would have shown a very different pattern.

Unfortunately, purity of doctrine was not attained without the grievous sacrifice of Christian unity. So far as the Church of England is concerned, its architects were Archbishops Cranmer and Parker, Bishop Jewel, and Richard Hooker, to whom we owe in the main our Prayer Book and Articles, and the comparatively smooth introduction of the new regime, initiated by the ebullient Henry VIII, and safely steered through its early troubles, political and religious, by his daughter, the astute Elizabeth I. The seventeenth century saw the Church surviving the perils of the Commonwealth (1649-1660) and the Revolution of 1689. The Restoration of the monarchy took place because the majority of Englishmen were weary of civil strife and experiment in government and Church life, and wanted nothing more than to return to familiar ways. At the outset, it was necessary to proceed with caution; Presbyterians were placated and staunch Anglicans were quietly appointed to key posts. After two years, the Savoy Conference and Prayer Book of 1662 made clear that few concessions would be made to Puritan consciences. The result was a substantial exodus from the Church of England, and the beginnings of modern dissent. The period between 1662 and 1689 saw a steady worsening of relations between Anglicanism and non-conformity. The conflict over the principles of toleration, comprehension, and exclusiveness came to a head in a succession of acts which made the continuation of dissent inevitable. Efforts to circumvent the Test Act by the practice of occasional conformity only served to harden Anglican attitudes, and battles in Convocation between Whigs and Tories brought Church government into such disrepute that Convocations were suspended in 1717, so leaving the Church without any official debating forum to deal with problems of general concern for nearly a century and a half. It gradually became clear that the two modes of faith, Anglican and dissenting, must fashion principles of co-existence, though at a time when unity of work and worship would have done much to assist the spiritual life of the country against Deist controversialists, and the growing inroads of religious liberalism. The victory of orthodoxy over Deism was a triumph of intellectual and theological argument, but the spiritual benefits were not reaped until the coming of Whitefield and John and Charles Wesley, whose evangelistic labours throughout the length and breadth of England transformed the life of the country. A parallel contribution was made by the Evangelicals, that is to say, by Anglican clergymen enlightened by the truth of the Gospel to preach the love of Christ in their parishes, without itinerating. Of these were Venn at Huddersfield, Grimshaw at Haworth, Walker at Truro, and Romaine in London, to mention but a few. These men brought hundreds to their communion tables, and kindled the fire of love for their fellow men in the hearts of hitherto nominal churchmen.

To the second generation belong such spiritual giants as John Venn of Clapham, Charles Simeon, and among the lay leaders, the bankers Henry and John Thornton, and William Wilberforce, whose great work was to secure the abolition of the slave trade. To this period (the beginning of the nineteenth century) belongs the foundation of various Evangelical organisations: the Church Missionary Society in

1799 for foreign missionary work; the London Society for promoting Christianity among the Jews (1809); the Society for educating the poor of Newfoundland (now the Commonwealth and Continental Church Society) in 1823, and the Church Pastoral-Aid Society in 1836. These four Anglican societies, together with the interdenominational Religious Tract Society and British and Foreign Bible Society, bound Evangelicalism into a coherent whole. Its aims were proclaimed by the *Christian Observer*, a monthly review founded in 1802, with Zachary Macaulay as editor, which printed biographies of the Fathers, character sketches, book reviews and theological papers of surprising weight at moderate cost. Most, if not all, of these activities received support from Charles Simeon, the great Evangelical statesman, who was for over fifty years incumbent of Holy Trinity, Cambridge. He sought to remedy the lack of training for the Ministry by his informal gatherings for undergraduates, to whom he expounded his ideas on the principles of preaching. He it was who secured continuity of teaching by setting up the trust which still bears his name to purchase advowsons, to which Evangelical parishes like-minded men might successively be appointed. By his death in 1836, Evangelicals had become a definite party in the Church, with clear cut policies, and strong missionary zeal, but without adequate representation at diocesan level, the single exception being Henry Ryder, brother of the Earl of Harrowby, a Cabinet minister, who was Bishop of Gloucester and later of Lichfield.

The publication of the first of the *Tracts for the Times* in 1833 marked the rise of a new feature in the life of the Church, the Oxford Movement. Its early leaders, Keble, Newman, Manning and Pusey set out to stress the authority of the Church, her faith, sacraments and worship. For all its massive intellectual weight, however, it was rather a movement of the heart than of the head. It quickly aroused the suspicions of those who feared that it would lead to an increase of 'high church' influence, and of Romanising tendencies—fears which appeared justified by the issue of Tract XC in 1841; in this, the author, Newman, tried to prove that the Thirty-nine Articles ought to be interpreted in accordance with the general background of Catholic doctrine. He concluded that they were directed against popular superstitions which have no place in official Romanism, and even appeared to suggest that the Articles say what they expressly deny. It was this which aroused such a storm of protest as turned the success of the movement into extreme disfavour. The secession of Newman and Manning to Rome only hardened the suspicions of many against the 'Puseyites', as they came to be called. But the devoted work of parish priests such as Lowder and Mackonochie in the London slums brought public opinion to realise that spiritual work of deep significance was being done, until it could truly be said that 'the Oxford Movement changed the external face, and the inward spirit, of English religious life'.[5]

Meanwhile there was growing a dangerous assault upon traditional Christian beliefs. The publication of Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830), Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) and *Descent of Man* (1871), *Essays and Reviews* (1860), and Bishop Colenso's Commentary on the

Pentateuch (1862), brought much confusion and emotional tension to the defence of orthodox faith. It took some time for the smoke of battle to clear, and the Church was not always best served by her chief protagonists; the famous debate between Bishop Samuel Wilberforce and T. H. Huxley before the British Association in 1860 illustrated the dangers of fighting on unfamiliar ground. Further attacks on the authority and significance of the Bible as the basis of the Christian revelation, largely emanating from Germany, were challenged by the Cambridge scholars Lightfoot, Westcott and Hort, and carried on by Swete and Sanday, who rolled back the tide of German invasion, so laying the foundations of a genuinely historical theology.

Two world wars in the present century have brought far-reaching changes in the life of the Church. By 1919 the extent to which institutional Christianity had lost its hold on the manhood of the nation was clearly recognised. This was partly the result of historical factors such as the changing social pattern resulting from the Industrial Revolution, with migration from country to town, leading to the disorganisation of effective parochial life in the large cities, and to the unbalanced economy of the nation. The mass unemployment of the 1930's still further emphasised the gap between Church and people, when the Church had so little to say in face of so much social misery. The second World War continued this process of disenchantment with the Christian Gospel and ministry, as diluted by Modernist exponents such as Bishop Barnes. To recognise failure may provide the spur to recovery, and the picture today is not entirely dark. The scandal of disunion has haunted the Church for the past fifty years with growing concern. The effects of the missionary conference at Edinburgh in 1910, though temporarily stifled by World War I, sparked off ideas which eventually bore fruit in many fields. The 'Appeal to all Christian people' put out by the Lambeth Conference of 1920, with its reference to the Lambeth Quadrilateral of 1888, brought about a new look at the relations between the episcopal and non-episcopal Churches. After many years of prayer and preparation, the emergence of the Church of South India in 1947 gave concrete expression to the widespread desire for Christian unity. In 1946, Archbishop Fisher's Cambridge sermon, suggesting that the Free Churches should 'consider taking episcopacy into their system' resulted in the setting up of commissions to study Anglican-Methodist, and Anglican-Presbyterian relations. The first meeting of the World Council of Churches at Amsterdam in 1948 also made possible the vision of œcumenical dialogue, which is a hopeful factor in modern Christian life, despite some attendant dangers. Nor has the Roman Church been inactive. The brief but spectacular era of Pope John XXIII, and the pronouncements of the Vatican Councils, have made necessary a re-appraisal of Anglican-Roman Catholic relations.

Such a compressed view of some highlights in Church history, though arbitrarily selective, must give rise to sober reflection. By the middle of the fourth century, the truth of our Lord's promise that 'the gates of hell' should not prevail against His Church had been established. Henceforth, internal disaffection would be a greater danger than external persecution. The Middle Ages brought the

scandal of the Church's misuse of power on both spiritual and material planes. The rediscovery of a purer faith at the Reformation recalled men to belief in the life-giving work of the Holy Spirit, based on obedience to the principles of Scriptural truth. Evangelical witness in the eighteenth century, followed by the unparalleled missionary expansion of the Church in the nineteenth century, re-emphasised the magnetic power of the Gospel to meet the needs of all nations and races. The situation today, dark as it is in many areas of the world, constrains us to gaze not only at the Church, but also at the Lord of the Church. In such perspective, the study of Church history may still be a cordial for drooping courage. 'Sire,' said Theodore Beza to King Henry of Navarre, 'it belongs to the Church of God in whose Name I speak, to endure blows and not to inflict them. But may it please your Majesty to remember that the Church is an anvil which has worn out many hammers.'

[1] 1 Corinthians 10, 11 (J. B. Phillips).
[2] *Creed or Chaos?* D. Sayers (1940), pp. 21-24.
[3] *The Reformation.* O Chadwick (1964), p. 73.
[4] *Ibid.*, p. 91.
[5] *The Mind of the Oxford Movement.* O Chadwick (1960), p. 58.