

Editorial

Evangelicalism and Anglicanism

The Evangelical Succession in the Church of England, edited by David Samuel (James Clarke: Cambridge 1979), is an intelligent, well argued case by those who represent one particular strand within the evangelical tradition. Amongst other things, it takes issue with what it calls 'the new evangelicalism', which it castigates for a readiness to come to terms with Anglo-Catholicism because it involved a cutting loose from the 'historical moorings in the Articles and the Prayer Book and the constitution of the Church of England.' Thus, it argues, 'the old position of affirming that evangelicalism was the true churchmanship of the Church of England was no longer regarded as tenable.' (p 97) This analysis raises several questions. On the one hand, the contribution of 'the new evangelicalism' can be viewed much more positively. On the other, it both overstates the strength of evangelicalism within the Church of England in the past, and ignores the degree to which earlier evangelicals came to accept other traditions within Anglicanism.

If it is true that Protestant Reformed doctrine is basic to the Articles, it is also true that these were barely acceptable to the more strongly Protestant elements and that the Church of England, in its liturgy and constitution, fell far short of their ideals. It had compromised too heavily. Indeed, as David Sceats pointed out in our last issue, 'successive Acts of Uniformity and Books of Common Prayer were *causes célèbres* of protest rather than bastions of everything best within Anglicanism.' (*Churchman* 93:4, 1979, pp 307-8) The more extreme Puritan dismissal of the Prayer Book as 'an unperfected booke, culled and picked out of that popishe dunghill, the Masse book full of all abominations', is well known; as is the determination with which some of the very 'evangelical' early Elizabethan bishops resisted a number of standard Puritan demands. The anxiety to come to terms with traditions other than evangelical is well illustrated by Ridley's and Cranmer's insistence that Hooper wear vestments for consecration to the see of Gloucester. They did so, not because of any fundamental conviction about the importance of vestments, but because they judged that these came in the category of 'things indifferent' and because of the conviction that compromise was necessary for the well-being and unity of the church. Cranmer, Ridley and their Elizabethan episcopal successors were consequently regarded with increasing suspicion by the hotter sort of Protestant who, dissatisfied with the insufficiently Reformed settlement, wanted dynamic and revolutionary change. The Protestant Reformation Society, somewhat

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ironically, now regards as ideal that past which the Puritans rejected or sought to modify substantially. One suspects that it does so, not so much because its conclusions differ from those of the Puritans, but because the complexity and ambiguity of our history has been underplayed. If this is so, it is a serious fault because it means that contemporary solutions are seen in a return to a past which has been, in measure, simplified, idealized and distorted.

However, though some of the historical analysis is open to debate, the concern expressed about the doctrinal confusion of contemporary Anglicanism must be taken very seriously. The editor asserts that comprehensiveness 'is not merely inclusiveness . . . not simply the combining together of all sorts of disparate and contradictory elements.' There must be, as the Reformers stressed, 'a coherent and recognizable system of doctrine.' (op. cit., p 99) He is right to stress the difference between the apparently limitless comprehensiveness of today and the circumscribed comprehensiveness of the first four centuries of Anglicanism. It is a difference which concerns other very different Anglican thinkers (cf. S. Sykes, *The Integrity of Anglicanism*, Mowbrays: London 1978, p 42). Where questions arise is in the simplistic equation of evangelicalism and historic Anglicanism and in the suggestion that the way forward is largely a matter of a return to past formulations.

There is a distinction between reformation and restitution: the former seeks a re-expression of the most fundamental truths of the past in the context of the present; the latter seeks the recreation of the past in a much more exact and mechanical way. The path forward must surely be that of reformation. This will involve great attention to the past but it will be, because it is rooted in the present, much more than a replay of what has been before.

The Report on Homosexuality

The Gloucester report raises many problems and will continue to be the subject of much controversial debate (General Synod, Board for Social Responsibility, *Homosexual Relationships: A Contribution to Discussion*, Church Information Office: London 1979). There is no doubt that the working party has laid out the evidence and arguments with some thoroughness and care and, though their bias is always evident, its members cannot be accused of acting without personal integrity. Nonetheless, it is more than a little puzzling that it has been so unanimous in its acknowledged rejection of the biblical and traditional Christian perspective. Its consensus stands in stark contrast to the divisions on this subject within the church at large. First reactions from the organs of opinion within Anglicanism suggest a rejection of its conclusions. Add to this the fact that no other major church has broken with traditional Christian understanding in the

way proposed, and the working party's radicalism stands in even greater relief.

This dichotomy between the report's conclusion and the official opinions of the church, past and present, raises questions about the composition and purpose of working parties. Should a very careful endeavour not be made to ensure that they represent the major traditions within Anglicanism? The church can only comprehend opinions and traditions which it allows to be heard and evangelicals, perhaps amongst others, can and should ask why their tradition was not reflected more explicitly on this working party. The dichotomy also raises questions about the function of working parties. The chairman speaks of going 'to the frontiers of the Christian tradition' and being 'adventurous' (*Church Times*, 19 October 1979, p 11). Certainly working parties should be prepared to explore the frontiers, and much else besides, but it is a surprise to see the word 'adventurous' used. There is a calling to be a catalyst to debate and action by taking adventurous positions at odds with the accepted wisdom. It is the function particularly of the academic and the prophet, but working parties, as a whole, should be expected to make their analysis, and present their conclusions in a way which both takes account of, and is likely to command the assent of, the church at large. Its failure to do so lays this working party open to the charge of irresponsibility, all the more so because of the impact of its recommendations outside the Church of England, particularly on secular society and ecumenical relationships.

The general public finds the distinction between the conclusions of working parties and of the church as a whole difficult, if not impossible, to make. In the minds of many, the 'adventurous' thinking of this working party will be regarded as the considered judgement of the church, despite the disclaimers of the BSR and despite any subsequent official rejection of its recommendations. 'It will', admits Giles Ecclestone, speaking of any such official document, 'attract to itself the *presumption* that its analysis of the situation is the right one; and it will provide the occasion for the perennial journalistic misconception that an authoritarian church has uttered.' (*Crucible*, October-December 1979, p 146)

Though other sections of the world-wide church are wrestling with this problem, few seem inclined to be so dismissive of traditional morality. The working party was surprisingly unaware of, or unconcerned about, the potential damage to ecumenical relationships which flows from its radicalism. This is significant, not so much as an example of insensitivity in the area of ecumenical politics, but as another illustration of its failure to take sufficiently seriously the weight others attach to the biblical and traditional evidence.

What the working party has done is to present the moral dilemma of the homosexual who is so by no choice of his own, and to pose this

predicament as a challenge to the church. This is an important service, and it would be a great pity if it were forgotten under the intensity of hostile reaction; but neither its handling of Scripture and tradition, nor its sensitivities to the deeply felt morality of the majority of Christians commands admiration. Certainly, therefore, the report should be examined and its arguments weighed, and this will be done at length in the next issue of this journal, but if, at the end of the day, it is concluded that these arguments do not carry conviction, Christians should not be afraid to say so. Ecclestone argues that, because the dilemma is great 'for those who wish to be faithful both to that insight they have received from the Christian community, and to their own hard-won moral conclusions', Christians 'must co-exist in charity with each other, accepting a plurality of understanding and, perhaps, practices while seeking more light.' (loc. cit.) For those who feel that the light, though capable of clarification, is sufficient, such an appeal for co-existence and plurality is not compelling. If the light is accepted in biblical and traditional terms, it must be followed, and that means opposing understandings and practices which, some claim, are far more widespread, particularly amongst the clergy, than is generally acknowledged (cf. letter of Dr D. MacCulloch, *Church Times*, 26 October 1979, p 14). It means declaring that active homosexuality cannot be approved, and that practising homosexual priests should not be permitted to continue in office.

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- Many articles are printed in *Churchman* with the intention of provoking debate. The editors will gladly consider correspondence in connection with them or articles in reply, though no guarantee of publication can be made. Normally, *Churchman* goes to press more than two months before publication, so that contributions need to be received before the end of January, April, July and October to have any chance of being printed in the next issue.