

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

Editorial

NOW that the Toronto Anglican Congress has come and gone it is not unreasonable to ask what the future may hold for Anglicanism. There are indications that the present moment is one of transition, if not of crisis, for the Anglican Communion. To begin with, however, it is perhaps not entirely otiose to affirm that to conceive of Anglicanism in terms of a global denominational empire—as Pan-Anglicanism—is wicked and unchristian; for such a concept, alluring though it may be in some respects, cannot fail to feed the flames of Anglican arrogance (*superbia anglicana*) and to foster ecclesiastical rivalries to the accompaniment of head-counting and head-hunting and statistical club-brandishing, which have no proper place in the Body of Christ, animated, as it should be, by love and humility. There is evidence that some at least of the leading participants of the Toronto Congress were not unaware of this peril. Thus the Archbishop of Canterbury is reported to have asserted that “the church that lives to itself will die by itself”; and Bishop Stephen Bayne emphasized that the end of Anglican missionary strategy was not that there should be more Anglicans, but that the Church of Jesus Christ should be planted in every place. Prior to the Congress, too, Canon Max Warren gave the warning (*Church Times*, 2 August) that “there is a real danger that we Anglicans will become as self-hypnotized by talking about ‘the world-wide Anglican Communion’ as were those men of old-time who became auto-intoxicated by chanting ‘The Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord’”.

Rather, however, than speak in terms of Anglicanism—a portmanteau word which may carry much or little significance—let us address ourselves more specifically to the situation that is disclosing itself in England at the present time. Readers in parts of the world other than England will doubtless find that their own “Anglican” situations differ from the English situation in degree rather than in kind.

The tensions and contradictions in the Church of England today are becoming so marked that it does not need a Cassandra to predict that, unless an effective cure is applied, they will lead to disintegration. Those who boast of the “comprehensiveness” of the Church of England must be hard pressed to justify the co-existence of antithetical and mutually destructive elements within the same fold. The present situation makes no kind of sense. The time was when a clergyman of the Church of England was expected conscientiously to assent to the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion and loyally to use the Book of Common Prayer in the conduct of public worship. But today every man does what is right in his own eyes, blithely resorting to the shift of “mental reservation” if it suits him. Some indeed assent wholeheartedly to the doctrine of the Articles and some faithfully adhere to the services of the Prayer Book (something which every parishioner has a right to

expect). But others—far too many—impugn the teaching of the Articles (to which they have publicly assented) and play fast and loose with the forms of service prescribed in the Book of Common Prayer (which they have promised to use).

What is so serious is that the issues involved are of a fundamental nature. Matters such as the Deity of Christ, the authority of Holy Scripture, the supernatural character of the Incarnation, the objectivity of the Atonement, and the factuality of the Resurrection, which are the very marrow of Prayer Book and Articles, are not matters which may be affirmed or denied, *ad lib.*, without plunging the Church into the most chaotic theological incoherence and evoking not merely the bewilderment but also the contempt of those who look on from the outside (whom the Church is supposed to be reaching with the clear and consistent message of the Gospel).

The comprehensiveness of the Church of England must be a comprehensiveness that makes sense—doctrinally, liturgically, and evangelistically. But the way things are going the prospects of such a comprehensiveness being realized are daily becoming more remote. There are those who, if they had their way, would turn the Church of England into a universalistic cult. They are, apparently, intent on abandoning the Christian absolutes in favour of an indiscriminating relativism which will comfortably accommodate the beliefs and unbeliefs of all and sundry. This is their brand of "catholicity"—the catholicity of the nondescript. They have no compunction about contradicting and condemning the teaching of the apostles if it does not coincide with their own favourite fancies. This is their brand of "apostolicity"—an apostolicity of rationalism, whereby, like the "super-apostles" (ὑπερλίαν ἀπόστολοι) who opposed Paul, they sit in judgment on the apostles of Christ. Only last month a certain dignitary is reported to have passed judgment on the erroneousness of some of Paul's beliefs and, maintaining that the Bible was only one among the holy books of the world, to have invited his hearers to ask themselves what evidence they had that the Bible was any more or less the word of God than any of the other ancient holy books of the world, or indeed of any other serious inspirational contribution or record of human knowledge and experience.

There is undeniably a wide comprehensiveness in the kind of church envisaged by such people—so wide, indeed, that there will be room for the most incongruous membership, including those who deny the absolute uniqueness of God's revelation and redemption in Christ Jesus—but so wide that there will be no place in it for those who hold fast to the eternal absolutes of the Christian Gospel, and who are determined that these absolutes shall not be sucked under by the quicksands of a relativism compounded of antipropositional, antisupernatural, anti-theistic, and humanistic ingredients.

There are others, again, who seem intent on shaping the Church of England into a sacerdotal sect, imitating the doctrine and ritual of Rome, but at the same time rejected by Rome. Their position is an unsatisfactory one, if only because their claims are disallowed both by the non-episcopal denominations, whom they unchurch, and also by the Roman Catholics, whom they seek to emulate. Given their pre-

suppositions, they are between the devil and the deep blue sea, and their only logical prospect of security, on their own terms, would be for them to place themselves under the Roman obedience—as John Henry Newman came to realize long ago. They have not abandoned the original absolutes, we are thankful to say, but they have added to them other and incompatible absolutes. In particular we would mention here their doctrine of “catholicity” and “apostolicity” as being ensured by the historic succession of bishops, with its rider that episcopacy is a ministry essential to the structure of the Church of Christ. This doctrine, however, has guaranteed nothing—witness the uncatholic and the unapostolic confusion in the Church of England today. It is, moreover, contrary to the spirit of the Gospel, as is seen by the manner in which its propounders fence the Lord’s Table against fellow-believers who are not and because they are not episcopalians, treating them as though they were no better than unbelievers and heretics. Insistence on this doctrine is being allowed to constitute the one great barrier in the way of reunion with the Free Churches. On this rock, if it is persistently interposed, all approaches to non-episcopal churches are doomed to founder.

That there is a better way has been shown by the Open Letter addressed to the Archbishops of Canterbury and York by thirty-two theologians of the Church of England nearly two years ago, in which it was affirmed that through the non-episcopal ministries our Lord conveys “the same grace of the Word and the Sacraments as He bestows through the historic ministry of bishops, priests, and deacons, and that He does this, not as an act of uncovenanted mercy, but because they are real and efficacious ministries within the Body of His Church”. This better way has been shown, in action, by the Church of South India, which, while embracing the episcopal form of church government, has resolutely refused to cast a shadow on the validity of the orders of the uniting non-episcopal ministries by having recourse to any procedure that might be interpreted as signifying episcopal ordination or re-ordination. The fact that officialdom has declined to accept the Church of South India as being “in communion with” the Church of England is a cause of shame and embarrassment to most members of the Church of England. Last month an appeal for the better way was made at the Toronto Congress by the Bishop of Llandaff, who urged that “episcopality” should be removed as a bar to union—that is, that member churches of the Anglican Communion should be able to “join other Christians in united churches without insisting beforehand that clergy be ordained by bishops”.

The better way for the Church of England is the way of the New Testament, which makes it clear that true apostolicity, and for that matter true catholicity, consists in uncompromising allegiance to the doctrine and the ethics of the apostles. (Christ and His apostles were well aware that right doctrine and right ethics go together: the present alarming declension in ethics is closely linked with the present alarming declension in doctrine. As St. Paul admonishes in the latter half of the first chapter of his epistle to the Romans, man’s suppression of the truth about God leads not only to the darkening of the heart—that is, the centre of man’s religious and intellectual consciousness—

but also to the appearance in society of all kinds of uncleanness and sexual perversion.) The church that follows this better way will not be tossed helplessly about on the waves of relativism. It will be guided constantly and consistently by the absolutes of God's Law and Gospel. On these absolutes it will be firm and undeviating; on secondary issues, however, it will show a flexibility and a comprehensiveness the bounds of which are determined only by the demands of authentic Christianity. Its episcopacy will be moderate and non-prelatical in character. The Lord's Table will be open to all fellow-believers and fenced only against unbelievers and those whose conduct, in contrast to their profession, is notoriously evil. It will be a church which gives priority to evangelism and ever subjects itself to the Word of God, and which, in proclaiming eternal truth, does so, by God's grace, in the dynamic and efficacious power of the ever blessed Holy Spirit.

God is sovereign: let us never doubt this. As we face the future, then, let us plan and act boldly in obedience to His will and Word, praying with the psalmist: "O Shepherd of Israel, stir up Thy strength and come and save us. Turn us again, O God, and cause Thy face to shine; and we shall be saved" (Ps. 80: 1ff).

P.E.H.
