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The Way Ahead for Anglican Evangelicals

DONALD MACLEOD¹

In facing the practicalities of the future, I am going to venture into fairly pragmatic territory.

Secession is not our immediate duty

My starting point is that *secession is not our immediate duty*. I say that for three reasons.

First of all, the New Testament is against it. It seems clear that in the New Testament period there were in the Church fairly serious errors in doctrine and, even more so, significant deviations from biblical patterns of conduct. We find that, very obviously, in Corinth and also in Galatia, Ephesus and so on. Yet the advice is never given, in any of those contexts, simply to leave that particular congregation. At Corinth there was immorality, a lack of discipline, denial of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and abuse of the Lord's Supper, all of which were, by any standards, very significant departures from apostolic norms. Yet not once does Paul suggest that believers ought to secede. He argues that the Corinthians, as a Church, ought to separate from the world but he does not teach that believers ought to separate from that Church itself. We find the same situation in Galatia where there is error of a fatal theological kind. Paul feels bound to express it *anathema*. There was a gospel which is not a gospel. He certainly argues that we should not give any kind of welcome to those who preach that kind of message but he does not anywhere suggest separation and the erection of separate assemblies. One can argue similarly from Revelation chapters two and three, where we have the letters to the churches of Asia. In these we find the Lord himself diagnosing the state of those churches and highlighting their very serious faults and shortcomings. Yet nowhere is it suggested that the time has come to leave those particular bodies. Now I do not want these illustrations to be taken as closing the arguments against secession as such. I am saying that secession is not our immediate duty. For example, we do not know what Paul might have said if the church at Corinth had refused to heed his directives for amendment and reformation. We find the Church of England today in a fairly critical state. It has been so for over three hundred years. The Church at Corinth had only been in existence for a decade or so. All I am saying is that on the basis of this New Testament evidence there is no case for immediate secession. I am not saying there is no case ever for secession.

Secondly, I think that history is against it. I think in particular of the giants of the past and their struggles for the church. I think of Athanasius, for example, who stood almost alone against the world, contending for the deity of our Saviour. He suffered ostracism, persecution and exile from his own native city and from his church too. Yet he did not contemplate seceding and setting up some kind of separate body. I think also of Martin Luther who, as he faced the corruption of the mediaeval church, took as his first option, not secession, but protest; and the affirmation, in a most provocative way, of fundamental biblical truth. I think also of J.G. Machen in the United States of America earlier this century. Again, profoundly conscious of the inroads and incursions of liberal theology, and dismayed by those incursions, he attacked them in the most direct way possible. Yet he did not himself initiate secession. At the last he was put out. So I think that history, too, is against immediate secession.

My third argument is this: we have not yet cleared ourselves. We have not cleared our own consciences. Athanasius, the apostle Paul, Luther and Machen pursued their protest to the very limit. They wrote. They argued. They prosecuted. They suffered. They used every avenue open to them for the amendment of the Church in a most courageous and far-sighted way. I do not think that we can claim that within the Church of England we have actually done that. We have not articulated the protest at the level at which we ought. Nor have we the right to secede. We have not cleared ourselves. I am not wanting to suggest a soft option, as if to remain is easier than to secede. It should not be easier, if we accept our responsibilities in terms of the divine summons, which is to do all in our power to remedy the current situation. Not until we have done that can we actually claim a moral right to secede. The position is similar to a marriage which is breaking down. Neither party has the right simply to walk out on the marriage without doing all in his or her power to put it together again. Only after we have done that and failed are divorce and separation possible.

Our Responsibilities

Well, if secession is not our immediate duty, what then is? *What responsibilities devolve upon us in our current situation?*

My first answer to that is this: we are called upon to pursue our given ministry with the utmost possible diligence. This is a point which I borrow from Bishop Ryle. He said long ago that the best help we could give to the Church Defence Society, as it then was, was to be diligent in our preaching, in our visitation, and in attending to all the responsibilities of our own parish. I am not thinking simply of those who are clergy. I am thinking of every member of the body of Christ involved in his or her own given ministry. It is incumbent upon each

one of us to commend the gospel and to commend evangelicalism, by attending punctiliously to our responsibilities. We are to be zealous to the limit of our capacity whatever our calling, whether it be preaching, pastoral or diaconal. We should pursue our ministry with exemplary Gospel-commending diligence. I am not going to labour the point, but it is very easy to be meticulously orthodox and yet deficient on pastoral commitment. There are lessons to be learned in the example of other traditions within the churches. It may be that those who major on preaching or pastoral responsibilities have very strong principles of conduct themselves and yet lack compassion for the weak and the deviant. It is very tempting for us to approach pastoral problems in terms of Canon Law rather than in terms of an over-riding concern for the individuals involved in those moral and spiritual dilemmas. And so I am saying, let Evangelicals be the best preachers. Let them be the best and the most diligent pastors, counsellors and carers. Let them show most concern for the poor. Is it really the case that David Jenkins is more concerned for Durham miners than are Evangelical pastors and clergy? Well, that should not be the case! It is our primary responsibility to attend to the utmost of our power to the obligations of our own calling and in that way to commend the principles for which we stand.

I think I would also make the point in that connexion that this is a limiting factor. I am saying this because I am going to sketch a programme which, on the face of things, will make great inroads into your time. You are going to ask, 'How can I gauge how much of my time to allocate to those pursuits which you are going to mention?' The answer largely is that if you diligently attend to your pastoral work then that will indicate how much time you can devote to those other pursuits that I am going to identify, such as, for example, political involvement in the life of your own denomination. We must never allow ecclesiastical bureaucracy and its demands to compromise our vocational integrity. Our first responsibility is to the people over whom God has set us. Anything we attend to above and beyond that is to be stolen from our own time. Therefore our pastoral diligence is very much a limiting factor.

If that is our first responsibility, the second is this: we must take our Anglicanism seriously. I want you to reckon with the fact that you are not autonomous units in independent congregations. You are part of a nationwide organism. I assume that you are part of that organism because it is your personal belief that local churches ought to be organically united or connected. You also have a vision, not only for your own village or suburb, but for the nation as a whole. That means, therefore, that you feel a measure of responsibility for every Anglican parish, Vicar and Bishop in the land. You also feel a concern for every geographical unit in the land; for every town and every village. Anglicanism is a national commitment; a national

Evangelical commitment. Now if that is the case, you have no right to make your own parish the limit of your ministry. Your responsibility and your vision do not end with your own parish. For good or ill we are, at last, our brothers' keepers. I could extend that. I think that Christians the world over are responsible towards each other. They are responsible for believers in the Soviet Union, Africa and China, and for believers in far away Scotland because it is the body of Christ. Very often there is a problem in that we are very concerned for believers who are far away, and very unconcerned for believers who live on our own doorsteps. Now I would put it to you, that many Evangelicals, both in Scotland and in England, who are members of the national churches, have been far too content to function as Independents. They have been given the freedom to preach in their own small corners and that luxury is all they ask. They do not interfere with anybody and nobody interferes with them. And they are quite happy. Now if that is the case we ought in conscience to be Independents and not to be Anglicans at all. If we are Anglicans then David Jenkins is our responsibility. So is Archbishop Tutu. We are all part of the same organism.

Thirdly, I am appealing for political involvement. I am using the word political rather loosely obviously, but there are such things, for good or ill, as denominational politics. As John Habgood has pointed out, church structures function on two levels, the charismatic and the bureaucratic—not his jargon but mine. The charismatic is that level of church structure sanctioned by the New Testament itself; the pastoral, preaching, episcopal dimension of church structure. And if we are ordained ourselves, then we must be involved in the politics of those particular structures within the various synods and so on within the Church of England. But what I say applies equally to the bureaucratic level, which in Scotland is expressed in a multitude of committees and which may well have the same expression south of the border. This is an area where in Scotland Evangelicals are conspicuous by their absence and, when present, conspicuous by their silence. We have no right to be crying up the times and saying the church is going to the dogs if we are not ourselves trying to do something about the problem through our own involvement in the politics of both the charismatic and bureaucratic ministry.

I wonder whether it is due to some hyper-sensitivity that so many Evangelical Anglicans have shut the door on this kind of involvement. It is applicable to the church as to the nation that, for evil to prosper, it requires only that good men do nothing. A large part of the current problem is due simply to Evangelical abdication. Now as I say, I am very conscious of my own instinctive shrinking from political involvement. I am very conscious of the perils and problems and pressures that such involvement can generate. It could very well be argued that no politics are as stressful as church politics, as it can be

said that no man can curse like a bishop. That can generate enormous personal pressure. If we are involved we need, I think, special armour and special protection. It requires the will to develop the requisite skills. Politics is about persuasion. You have to learn how to persuade. You have to learn to define practicable and achievable goals. You have to develop a tough skin to be able to sleep at nights. You have to be willing to accept power and resolve the personal paradox of humility and authority. How can a humble man pursue power? How can a humble man accept power? How can a humble man retain power? The devil can drive us schizoid on that one very, very quickly. It is as well to accept that there is no level of politics at which you can achieve anything without power. If you do not want power you should not be in the politics. I am saying to Evangelicals, 'Do you want the power to change things, or are you quite happy to have all the power in Canterbury?' Power means responsibility. Power means that you do not please everybody. You do not please even your own constituency. That can be extremely hard.

I can very, very well understand why sensitive men do not want to be involved in those political situations. It may be that I in my small corner feel that politics and the church do not go together. But even a small local church has its own politics. Indeed, one can have a youth fellowship of twelve people and it still has political problems. These problems go with the presence of human multiples. If you get three youngsters, three ladies or three men together you have political problems. We do not need to have a grand scale to see those difficulties. Church structures will very significantly affect the Church's message, the Church's pastoral care and the Church's evangelistic efficiency. If we are concerned for those things, we must be concerned with the politics of our own denomination. Our Churches are instruments for Christian good or they are instruments for evil. That depends very much upon the structures according to which they operate. There must be Evangelical involvement in those structures, in the way they are fashioned and in the way they are operated.

Fourthly, I think that without secession, there must be separation within the denomination itself. I do not know the ins and outs of the Anglican set-up well-enough to comment on this with any expertise, but we ought to refuse to engage in any Anglican activity that compromises the Christian gospel. That means that we will not allow a man to preach from our pulpits simply because he is an Anglican, or allow a bishop to perform confirmation ceremonies just because he is an Anglican bishop. It certainly means that individual Christians should not remain in Anglican churches a day longer than the gospel. That problem is not confined to Anglican churches by any means. It is a sad thing that denominational loyalty often leaves Christians in dead local churches. If your local Anglican church is preaching a

gospel other than the Pauline gospel, or preaching no gospel at all then, without a single qualm of conscience, you should separate from it and go elsewhere. There can be separation within the actual denomination itself in terms of the withholding of fellowship from those with whom one has some tenuous bond.

Fifthly, there must be confrontation. Maybe it is at this level that we have been the most conspicuous failures. We have not confronted the deviations as we ought to. Now by confrontation I mean, at one level, academic confrontation. The utterances of those various prophets of Modernism and Anglo-Catholicism are to be exposed with all the dialectical powers of persuasion and research skills that we can muster. They should be called bluntly and exactly what they are. There really is a difference between the register of academic denunciation and the register of prophetic denunciation. At one level I must say this book is not adequately documented. At the other I must say that it is heresy. We have been singularly reluctant, since the days of J.G. Machen, to face Modernism with that level of explicitness and to say simply, 'This is not Christianity'. That is why we are inclined to the view that there are three entities, Catholicism, Evangelicalism and Modernism. We are assuming that Liberalism has some kind of Christian validity. That is a very debatable proposition. Liberalism, as far as I understand it, is an alternative to Christianity and not a variation upon it. When I speak of confrontation I mean confrontation at that particular level. I do not mean at all that non-inerrantists are heretics. There are non-inerrantists who are not heretics. There are some men who do not believe in the Bible's inerrancy who yet hold to substantial Christian positions. When we talk of heresy, or the scale of denying Christian fundamentals, then the confrontation must conclude by saying, 'This is a denial of fundamentals, this is heresy and it ought not to be tolerated within the Church of Christ'.

We move then—do we not?—from academic confrontation to ecclesiastical confrontation, that is, to the endeavour to exclude this teaching and say, 'This has no right to exist and this ought not to be said within the Church of England. This level of pluralism, and this degree of departure from the theological core and norm, is intolerable.' If you say, 'Ah, but the Church of England does not have provision for such pressure, for such confrontation,' then there must be pressure towards creating facilities for such confrontation. There must be limits to theological pluralism. We simply cannot allow that from Anglican pulpits, or Anglican thrones for that matter, anything or everything can be said without fear of confrontation.

Sixthly, I am suggesting the legitimacy of ecclesiastical disobedience. I am not at the moment calling for it because it is your neck not mine. But I am suggesting it. We accept the legitimacy of this in the civil sphere when government begins to behave in a way that is at variance

with accepted norms. When it becomes tyrannical or racist and self-aggrandizing then it is right to engage in civil disobedience. We base that principle, broadly, on the fact that we have no right to do what God forbids or to defy what God commands. When government asks us to do what God forbids then we defy it. When it forbids what God commands then we defy it. There are situations when non-compliance to its directives and non-payment of its taxes is perfectly defensible and legitimate.

Martin Luther said, according to legend, 'Here I stand. I can do no other. So help me God.' There are situations where I would refuse, even in my own church, orthodox though it is at the moment, to obey certain orders. Once or twice I have said that if that order is made then I will not obey it. I think that situation is much more frequent in broadly liberal churches. For example, suppose the Church of England enacts the ordination of women to the priesthood. Suppose it makes it mandatory that all the clergy participate in such ordinations. I foresee the argument: 'I am an Anglican. The Anglican church says I must ordain women. Therefore my conscience will bend. I will ordain women. And the Church can carry the can for it.' That is not permissible in my view. The Church is then requiring what God forbids. I simply must defy the church. One can envisage many other situations of similar import. If we are required to be party to the ordaining of somebody who defies the gospel, or party to the acclamation of a bishop who denies fundamental doctrines, then I think we must practise ecclesiastical disobedience. I am even suggesting that you look for yourselves at the possibility and desirability of withholding funds from certain Anglican ventures. If those ventures are functioning to the detriment of the Christian gospel we really have to begin at this level of pragmatism.

It bothers me a great deal that I have seen in my own life-time, within the last thirty years, so many critical points when Evangelical colleagues in the mixed denominations have said, 'If that happens, then I quit'. I have seen so many Rubicons. Each one that has come has been blunted so that it is no longer a sticking-point or Rubicon. There has been a constant retreat from Rubicons. We must face the fact that where the Church, even in the name of Christ, commands us to do what God forbids, or forbids what God commands, then we simply have to disobey the church in the most explicit and emphatic manner possible.

A New Alignment

That then is the immediate programme. If we adopt that programme seriously it will follow that we must be ready for a new alignment, which is my shorthand for secession. I say that for two reasons.

First of all, we may find ourselves expelled from the Anglican body. It is a great thing the way we constantly applaud Luther and his action.

Yet we run the risk of dancing upon his tomb. What Luther did we patently would not have done. He made himself such a nuisance, he spoke so provocatively, he spoke so not nicely that he was ejected. J.G. Machen did the same. There is no reason for us to cultivate rudeness because we are engaged, after all, in the business of persuasion. On the other hand, we should not blunt the edge of our utterances out of regard for the consideration that if we are not careful they will throw us out. We should be willing to be thrown out. We should make up our minds what has to be said. We should say it with the utmost clarity. Let there be no ambiguity. We are not trying to initiate a new Tractarian Movement effective in proportion to its vagueness. We are endeavouring to launch an opposite movement, reformation through clarity and perspicuity. If we do that we shall become the most awful nuisances. I do not want us to cultivate being nuisances, but I do not want us to be deterred by the charge of being nuisances.

Secondly, we must be ready for a new alignment because we may very soon be abandoned. This is the more likely scenario. The A.R.C.I.C. wagon is rolling. It is generating more and more momentum by the hour. If its plans are consummated then what will happen will be that a majority of Anglicans will vote for union with Rome under some kind of uniate arrangement, and especially under a papal primacy. Evangelicals will vote against that decision. They will have every right to feel betrayed because for three centuries they have clung to the non-Evangelical brethren in the name of Anglicanism and loyalty to it. But now they find those Anglo-Catholics, with little hesitation, opting for the fellowship of Rome over against that of Evangelicals. The position then will be that the majority will be in secession, in schism. They are leaving the Church of England and entering a different body. It would be incomprehensible and unforgivable for Evangelicals to follow them into that union. The day that step is taken all talk of fellowship between Anglican Evangelicals and the rest of us becomes meaningless. There could be no such thing. What I hope we will find is the rump of the Church of England abandoned and called upon to reorganize itself and to face up to the reality of its new situation.

If that it is so, then the time has come already to formulate the plans as to our action in that event. Here again I am taking a very worldly, unspiritual view. I know that many of my Evangelical brethren would say, 'Evangelicals do not plan, they pray. They are not political animals. They are charismatics. They leave things to God.' I think it is enormously important to plan. I remind you, again, that the apostle Paul was a brilliant organizer. He was interested in collections. He carried collections from one place to another. The Reformers were great organizers, and not least your own Anglican Reformers. They laid plans. Whitefield and Wesley were great

organizers. They knew that the church of God has to have a body as well as a soul, machinery and structures as well as the gospel.

The consummation of the A.R.C.I.C. proposals may lie ten years in the future. That does not give us all that much time to lay our plans. I insist on it because in the absence of such plans we shall run into very grave dangers. For example, if there is no coherent policy then individuals here and there will begin to secede and drop off; this clergyman here, this clergyman there; this church here and this church there; dribs and drabs; little vulnerable, incoherent evangelical units. That would be a terrible tragedy. If there is to be secession let it be coherent secession, not accidental, not disorganized, not atomistic, but the organized secession of Evangelicals.

There is a danger too that clergy will secede without their congregations. They are the professionals. The mentality has grown up in the last one hundred years for the professionals to lie awake in bed at night worrying about their future in the Church of England or some other body. They decide to go. They tell their churches they are going and they secede from their local church. They are in schism from their local church. I do not say in all instances that we must take our churches with us, but we must indeed fight because we are married to them. In my Gaelic background the induction of a minister is defined and referred to as a marriage. We say quite openly of such inductions, 'Are you going to the marriage?' There is a very precious bond between pastor and people. In Scotland in 1843, in the Disruption, clergy did not secede without the people. Their congregations went with them. That requires planning, foresight and organization. So let us be sure that when the time comes there is coherent action rather than atomistic action, and that there is popular action and not simply clerical action.

Furthermore without plans there will be no form of consultation between the various bits of wisdom left among Anglican Evangelicals. There really needs to be a pooling of our wisdoms if we are to face the massive intellectual strength of the opposition. Consultation requires planning.

In 1842 and 1843, before the Free Church came into being, there was a series of great meetings and at last a convocation at which the issues were hammered out—'Suppose Parliament does not abolish patronage, what do we do?' The decision was not taken by ministers in lonely Highland manses. It was taken in consultation and convocation. They talked to each other and they talked to their people. They thrashed out the principles. They thrashed out the practicalities. And when Parliament acted as it did act, then they put their plan into operation, smoothly, efficiently, and very, very effectively. Thus as the implementation of A.R.C.I.C. becomes more and more of a probability it is time for an Anglican Evangelical convocation to decide the course of action to be pursued if and when

A.R.C.I.C. is implemented. I would hope that there is an agreed and coherent response to that particular decision.

There is an enormous range of practical issues. We must decide, for example, whether such an Anglican remnant would be episcopal or Presbyterian or something else. What form of polity would it have? What basis of faith? What form of subscription to the basis of faith? What kind of funding? Suppose you lose all your buildings? Who will train your ministers? Will you fight to retain the property? I would hope you would. You must face those issues because, for good or ill, you are actually in the flesh. You are in this world with its laws, its need for finance, and its need for buildings.

You must begin to say to yourselves, therefore, there is more to this than spirituality. There must be a political spirituality. There must be the wisdom of the serpent under God to work out where we go from here in terms of pragmatics. How can we move the people? How many people are aware of the imminence of a crisis? How many ordinary members of the churches are aware of the issues?

In Scotland in the nineteenth century there was a massive attempt to inform the ordinary population using a national newspaper of the highest quality. This was the organ of the Evangelical party. They used a band of articulate spokesmen who went from place to place to explain the issues and to tell the grass-roots what the dangers were, what the possibilities were, what action was proposed, what help was needed and to enlist their informed support.

I want to close on this note. A fear of schism is very prevalent among Evangelicals, and rightly so, because schism or heresy is a work of the flesh. Is it schism to separate from the Church of England? Is it schism to remain a part, once the majority decide to abandon the Church of England? I want to remind you of one thing. Schism is separation from the Church, not from a denomination. With the best will in the world the Church of England is not the Church of Christ as such. It is an aspect of it. It is maybe even several denominations within the one denomination, but it is at last, only a denomination. We do not have any right to define separation from it as schism. If it were then many of us here today are guilty of schism.

As I see it, your local churches within the Anglican communion have decided to align themselves with the Church of England. I do not see why they should not make a different decision, if they felt so called upon, and align with some other denomination. And I do not see why, if the A.R.C.I.C. proposals are implemented, a large group of such congregations should not decide to meet with one another and form a new alignment within England. Hopefully they would summon or invite their non-Anglican brethren into that new alignment and create in England what it has not seen for a long long time—a nationwide institution committed to Evangelicalism.

The Way Ahead for Anglican Evangelicals

It may be that A.R.C.I.C. is God's way of breaking up obsolete and obstructive structures. Although at the moment we do not see God's plans, he is indeed working out his own designs and his own sovereign will. Let us not look unbelievably at the situation.

Blind unbelief is bound to err and scan his works in vain;
God is his own interpreter and he will make it plain.

Or as Cowper also said in the same context,

The bud may have a bitter taste but sweet will be the flower.

Possibly that is what we are facing now—God's own way of redrafting, not the Church *of* England but the Church *in* England.

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NOTES

- 1 A paper read to the Church Society Day Conference in the North East held in St. Stephen's Church, Elswick, Newcastle-upon-Tyne on 7 November, 1987.