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Churchman

EDITORIAL

Celestial fire?

One of the nice things about the Archbishop of Canterbury is that you never quite know what he is going to do next. Ever since the consecration of a practising homosexual bishop in the United States, people across the Anglican Communion have been asking him to take a firm lead to resolve the crisis. For seven long and lean years, the Archbishop has replied that Anglicanism is a loose church and that unlike the pope, he has no authority to make binding pronouncements or to pass judgement on anybody. Then all of a sudden, we find him speaking *urbi et orbi* to the ‘bishops, clergy and faithful of the Anglican Communion’, not telling them what to do exactly, but making it pretty clear what the way forward ought to be. The style of address comes straight from the Vatican, which may cause some confusion among those Anglicans who are not used to receiving missives from that quarter. Many Evangelicals for example, will be wondering why the letter seems to be directed to them more than to others. Do the unfaithful members of the church not get a look-in as well? ‘Bishops’ and ‘clergy’ will cover some of them, no doubt, but surely not all! Of course, by ‘faithful’, the Archbishop means simply ‘lay members of the Anglican church’ but confusion arises because we use the word in a different way and find this usage somewhat disconcerting.

This may seem like a trivial matter to some, but it points to an underlying difference of ecclesiology that has more than a little bearing on the current Anglican crisis. In a very real sense, the troubles we face are all about being faithful—the question is being faithful to what? This not only goes unanswered; it goes unaddressed, because if the Archbishop’s use of the word is accepted, it becomes difficult to know what to ask. If someone were to approach you and inquire whether you are a Christian or not, would you reply: ‘Yes, I am a member of Christ Church, Canterbury’? More importantly, what would you make of someone who did give that kind of answer? If you were asked when you became a Christian, would you say: ‘I became a Christian when I was baptised’? How would you react if someone said that to you? Put the matter like this and it soon becomes clear what the differences

between Evangelicals and those of the Catholic tradition essentially are. We do not reject baptism or church membership, but neither do we think that such things determine our standing in the sight of God. What matters to us is that a person who calls himself a Christian is born again by the Holy Spirit and possesses the mind of Christ as this is revealed to us in the Holy Scriptures. If those things are in place, then the rest can be worked out in a variety of different ways. But if they are not present, then all the external validation in the world will not suffice to make a person Christian. This is why we do not use a word like 'faithful' to mean simply 'church member' and why we cannot build our spiritual fellowship on the basis of a common participation in the sacraments, important as that is.

A real Christian is not someone who has been baptised with water but someone who has been born again of the Holy Spirit, which is a very different thing. Baptism proclaims the new birth but is not a substitute for it, nor is it the means by which spiritual rebirth is achieved. One of the arguments used by the pro-homosexual lobby in the United States is that because they are part of the 'baptised community' they have every right to bring their unique gift to the table of fellowship and share it with the rest of us. By rejecting that, it is we who are dividing the church and cutting ourselves off from the voice of the 'spirit'. If that is the sort of construction that can be put on baptism, then Evangelical Christians have no choice but to disagree. As far as we are concerned, those who live in the Spirit must be filled with the Spirit, and those who are filled with the Spirit must live according to the Bible and the orthodox rule of faith which it proclaims.

That this is not the sort of church the archbishop has in mind can be seen from the next line, where he moves on to consider the Holy Eucharist, in which our 'unity in and through the self-offering of Jesus is reaffirmed and renewed as we pray for the Spirit to transform both the bread and wine and ourselves, our souls and bodies.' Here we see a confusion between spirit and matter which Anglicans repudiated at the time of the Reformation. Article 28 could not be more clear about this:

Transubstantiation (or the change of the substance of bread and wine) in the supper of the Lord, cannot be proved by Holy Writ, but is repugnant to the plain words of Scripture, overthroweth the nature of a sacrament, and hath given occasion to many superstitions. The body of Christ is

given, taken and eaten in the supper, only after an heavenly and spiritual manner. And the mean whereby the body of Christ is received and eaten in the supper is faith.

What is a transformation of the bread and wine if it is not a kind of transubstantiation? Once again, there will be those who will say that this is mere quibbling over words, and sixteenth century words at that, but this is not so. At the heart of the argument is the nature of Christian fellowship, which the Eucharist is meant to express but which it cannot create. If there is evidence that a church member is not living according to the Word of God, and if that is brought to public attention and censured, then the person concerned must be excommunicated, because he does not share the beliefs that those who partake of the sacrament are expected to profess. This is the fundamental problem we have with the American Episcopal Church. As an official body it has not merely stopped struggling against the world, the flesh and the devil, but has invited them in to sit down and share in the feast of the redeemed. Those who object—and there are many faithful witnesses inside the Episcopal Church who have done so—are either sidelined or silenced. It is they who are excommunicated, not those who have jettisoned orthodox Christianity and covered their apostasy by performing traditional rituals. We need not doubt that the Episcopal leadership has been canonically elected and has followed all the correct procedures, but the evidence of the church's public teaching makes it clear that it has long since distanced itself from the substance of the matter.

This brings us to the most depressing thing about the Archbishop's Pentecost letter, which is that it says nothing at all about the content of Christian belief and its fundamental importance for Christian fellowship. Instead it concentrates on emotive words like 'pain' and 'conscience' which are elevated to the status of objective categories that determine everything else. As the archbishop sees matters, it is not false teaching but the pain caused by the exercise of different (and mutually conflicting) consciences that has caused the current problem, and there is really no way of dealing with that in any very effective manner. Once again, Evangelicals have to dissent from this analysis, not because we want to cause pain and certainly not because we do not have a conscience, but because neither of these things gets to the root of the problem. It is true that Martin Luther is supposed to have appealed to his conscience when he stood up to defend his 'heresies' in front of the authorities of church

and state at the Diet of Worms, but we must remember what the words attributed to him actually are: ‘My conscience is captive to the Word of God.’

There is the rub. It is not enough to have a conscience and act according to it. If my conscience is not subject to the Scriptures, then it is wrong. I may be respected for following it, and of course being wrong is not a crime, but I am still not doing the right thing. Nor can the pain I would feel at being excommunicated be invoked as a reason for those whose duty it is to uphold the truth not to proceed along that path. This is why faithful members of the Anglican Communion cannot regard themselves as being in fellowship with the American Episcopal Church as a corporate body. It is not for us to judge where its individual members stand in the sight of God, and none of us would ever dream of calling ourselves ‘perfect’, as the archbishop seems to fear at one point in his letter. Of course we all need to repent. And yes, there are many faithful soldiers and servants of Jesus Christ left inside the Episcopal Church whom we must do our utmost to help and comfort in their time of need. What we are talking about here is not that, but something else—the open and public affirmation of false doctrine as the official policy of that church.

The great weakness of the Windsor Report, and one that continues to afflict the approach taken at Lambeth, is the inability to appreciate the fundamental difference between the approval given to homosexual behaviour in North America on the one hand, and the ‘intervention’ by other provinces on the other. The American Episcopal Church and the Anglican Church of Canada have made public statements affirming the legitimacy of homosexual acts, thereby making them part of their official teaching. They have approached the rest of the Anglican Communion demanding to be accepted, which in practice means that every other Anglican church is being asked not only to ratify this teaching in North America but to regard it as acceptable for Anglicans everywhere. After all, if the American Episcopal Church is in communion with the Church of Tanzania (say), how can the Tanzanians legitimately exclude an American bishop who is also a practising homosexual without breaking that communion? The onus of schism would lie with them, not with the Americans, and in this way false teaching would find itself at home in the worldwide church.

The ‘intervention’ which was so strongly censured by the Windsor Report, is very different from this. No Anglican province advocates it as a matter of

policy, nor does it form part of anyone's official teaching. Those who have intervened have done so at the invitation of people in North America who had already broken with their own church, so it is not even clear that they have infringed anyone's jurisdiction. Furthermore, far from pressing this sort of thing on the rest of the Communion, the interventionists have done all they can to re-establish an Anglican presence in North America which they can recognise as the legitimate ecclesiastical authority there. By failing to distinguish between a settled policy and an emergency reaction, the Windsor Report and the Lambeth authorities have shown that they do not know the difference between what is primary and what is secondary. No wonder their proposed covenant is in such trouble. Who would entrust decision-making to people who have shown themselves incapable of understanding what is really going on?

It is interesting, if somewhat odd, that the archbishop cites the case of infant baptism as an example of how we should handle our differences. He claims that there are many Anglicans who reject infant baptism, but argues that because it is the official policy of the church, such people should not be the Communion's accredited representatives, particularly in ecumenical settings where they are expected to toe the official line. On that basis, he suggests that the American Episcopal Church, and unnamed others who have also transgressed the Anglican norm, should not be asked to sit on such bodies, although their private eccentricities can still be tolerated just as we tolerate those who reject infant baptism.

The parallel is somewhat strange but it is instructive. Anglicans who reject infant baptism know that they are a minority voice and they seldom try to change the church's official policy. If they feel strongly about it, they leave and go elsewhere. Most of us respect them for that and continue to regard them as fellow Christians, because we do not believe that the issues involved touch the heart of the faith. Could we perhaps tolerate differences of approach to homosexuality and especially to homosexual practice in a similar way? In countries where same-sex 'civil partnerships' are legal there will always be problems in trying to impose a strict discipline on church members and differences of approach and practice are bound to arise. To that extent there is already a degree of tolerance which will probably continue, if only because it is almost impossible to do anything else. Nevertheless, if infant baptism is

taken as some sort of guide, there is nothing dishonourable about expecting those who find their dissenting status intolerable to leave and join a homosexual church instead. They could then restrict its membership to people who share their views (as Baptists often do) and get on with making their own particular witness to the world. What we cannot do is change the Christian faith in order to keep them on board. Here the parallel with infant baptism, such as it is, breaks down. Differences over baptism do not affect any fundamental Christian doctrine and Evangelicals can live quite happily with variations in practice. Homosexual behaviour is different, because it is morally and spiritually wrong in itself. A Baptist church can be perfectly orthodox, but a homosexual one would have to be classified with the Unitarians, Jehovah's Witnesses or Mormons—in other words, not orthodox Christians at all. We have no desire to persecute them and do not think that we are better people than they are, but we do not recognise them as fellow believers in Christ, even if they themselves claim to be such.

No-one should pretend that the task of disciplining and reshaping the Anglican Communion will be easy. As the recent invitation to Mrs Schori, the presiding bishop of the American Episcopal Church, to preach and preside at a eucharist in Southwark Cathedral shows, there are gospel-free zones in the Church of England barely more than a stone's throw away from Lambeth Palace. The archbishop needs our prayers and support in dealing with this problem, as do all those who have a voice in proclaiming the truth of God's Word in and to the church. If we are critical of them it is not because we reject their offices but because we want them to act as the responsibility conferred on them dictates. May God bless them and give them the courage to do what is right in this time of decision for the Anglican Communion and for the wider Christian world of which it rightly wants to remain an integral part.

GERALD BRAY