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Churchman

EDITORIAL

Here We Stand

Anyone who has followed developments in the Anglican Communion over the last couple of years must surely be deeply depressed by now. The consecration of a practising homosexual as a bishop in the United States has opened a fissure which shows no signs of going away, and the divisions which it has caused have crept into other provinces, including such places as Brazil and Central Africa, which on the surface would appear to be remote from such concerns. In the Church of England a frontal attack by the revisionists was fended off when Jeffrey John was forced to back down from his appointment as suffragan bishop of Reading, but the pressure has continued in other ways, most noticeably in the recent decision of the house of bishops to allow for 'civil partnerships' among the clergy as well as the laity. These provisions have been greeted in the secular media with the derision they deserve, though it is a safe bet that most readers of this journal would want the matter to be resolved in a very different way from the one favoured by the average journalist.

It remains to be seen whether the newly-elected General Synod will turn out to have a more effective opposition than the last one did, but hopes for this cannot be very high. There are many faithful men and women in the Synod and we must be grateful for the hard work which they put into matters which most of us find recondite and boring. Unfortunately there is no equivalent to the kind of rigorous parliamentary party discipline which a consistent anti-revisionist policy would require, with the result that crucial votes will be lost because individuals who cannot grasp the importance of matters which on the surface seem to be obscure and inconsequential will hesitate to object. The trouble is that civility and a desire for consensus create an environment which favours the revisionists, who are often quite prepared to dress up their proposals in reassuring language (for example, 'civil partnerships are not marriages') which then neutralize the opposition of those who are too timid or muddled to take a stand against them.

It is hard to see what the way forward should be, but perhaps the current crisis is a message from God that it is time to re-emphasise the fundamental principles of our faith. It is always easy in times of controversy to be distracted by side-issues which then become central and provoke divisions which could and should be avoided. The church today is heavy with the baggage of past disputes which may have been important in their day but which are now difficult to understand and tend to act as powerful arguments against further doctrinal definition, rather than as encouragements towards it. Protestants have argued questions like baptism and church government to death, creating 'traditions' which now stand in the way of closer fellowship whenever they are brought up but which do little or nothing to promote the unity of the church in the face of far greater challenges from outside. Is it worth risking a repeat performance today?

In one sense of course it is not, and we should never try to fan the flames of conflicts which are best left to wither away on their own. But having said that, we must also recognise that the issues facing us now are not secondary matters which can be brushed aside as less than fundamental. Even if some of the details are obscure, the principles involved go to the very heart of our faith. In particular, two things stand out above all others. The first of these is the doctrine of creation. How did God make us and for what purpose? There is a great deal of disquiet in some mainline scientific circles about recent theories of 'intelligent design' which are widely believed to be a covert way of reintroducing creationism into biology by the back door. Probably there are people who are trying to do that, but the promoters of intelligent design insist that their theory makes sense in purely rational terms, whether or not those who hold it believe in the God of the Bible. Christians who are not experts in the field will be reluctant to make pronouncements one way or the other, but it seems inevitable that anyone who believes in Jesus Christ and accepts that the Bible is the Word of God will be committed to some form of 'intelligent design' argument, even if there is uncertainty on points of detail. How could it be otherwise? The doctrine of creation implies intelligent design, and Scripture teaches it with great clarity. Parts of this design are the mechanisms which have been devised for the providential continuity of the created order through time. Sexual intercourse between animate beings is one of these things, and the Judaeo-Christian tradition has always insisted that it must be regulated for the better fulfilment of its primary aim. It is in this context that we have to approach issues ranging from abortion to divorce, from pornography to homosexuality.

On all of these fronts, we are under siege in the modern world, whose opinion formers do not accept this analysis of creation, but often we have been unable to come up with a coherent counter-strategy because we have failed to relate particular issues to underlying principles. Instead, we have been swept along by pragmatic and *ad hominem* arguments which extol the expanding horizons of modern science (and pseudo-science) and turn individual human ‘freedom’ into an absolute moral good. That there is a delicate balance in God’s creation which we upset at our peril, and that we human beings, who have been given ‘dominion’ over it, are all subtly interconnected, is forgotten. But if men and women do not respect the boundaries laid down by God for his universe, and if they are more inclined to demand rights and recognition for themselves than to support and affirm each other, what future can there be? Here there is a fundamental issue which stretches from the home to the church, from the absent father to the prospective woman bishop. In the one case as in the other, the responsibility placed on us all to uphold and promote our interdependence is lost as men shirk their responsibilities and women seek a power which is not theirs. But instead of seeing the broader picture, we confront each of these problems in isolation, forgetting that none of them can be solved unless and until there is a coherent reappropriation of the God-given creation model for our lives.

The second issue, closely connected to the first, is the whole question of sin. Evangelical Christians are frequently (and to some extent rightly) criticised by their more Catholic brethren for not having an adequate doctrine of creation. According to this Catholic critique, Evangelicals tend to deny the implications of Christ’s incarnation and preach a kind of disembodied spirituality which tolerates abuses in this life because it is only the next life that matters. This is a caricature of course, and it is not hard to find examples of Evangelical social work (to go no further) which contradict this accusation. However, there is more to this question than appears on the surface. Evangelicals appear to many ‘Catholics’ to lack an incarnational spirituality because in Evangelical eyes this has to be combined with (and modified by) something else—the doctrine of original sin, or (as the Puritans would have put it) total depravity. It is all very well to glory in creation, but we must also remember that we live in a fallen world and cannot expect the created order to save us from it.

The fault does not lie in ‘nature’ of course. Neither our genes nor any combination of viruses or bacteria can be blamed for the ills of the society in

which we live; still less should we criticise hurricanes, earthquakes and other natural phenomena which cause so much destruction. The fault lies not with them, but with ourselves. Adam and Eve were created as mortal beings who were preserved from death as long as they obeyed God's commandments. When they disobeyed him, the protection was removed and they were forced to experience the consequences of their mortality. Similarly, when we become Christians, we are not given a ticket out of the world, so that we no longer have to experience suffering and death—a believer in Christ can be swept away by a tsunami just as effectively as anyone else, and all of us will pass away someday. We are instructed to pray for a happy and holy death, not for immortality in this life, and the wise person lays up his treasure in heaven in preparation for that inevitable homecoming.

The fault lies in a broken relationship with God which has to be put right. God has provided for this by sending his Son to die for us on the cross, which is why the penal substitutionary atonement (another bedrock belief which has been attacked of late) is so essential. Without that we have not been saved and there is no salvation possible. We do not have to deny that penal substitution has an unpleasant aspect to it; after all, sin is not a pretty sight and the cure, if it is to get to grips with the essence of the problem, is not likely to be pretty either. The crucified Christ was 'without form or comeliness, that we should desire him' and the cross will always be foolishness to some and a scandal to others. Bending over backwards to keep the mockers and the sceptics happy is not only a complete waste of time; it is a denial of what we are called to do as witnesses to Christ. Yet how often has the cause of the Gospel been compromised by that 'niceness' which refuses to put the finger on sin and call for conviction and repentance?

Here we come back yet again to the crisis currently afflicting our church. What are we to say about people, some of them in high places, who actively promote immorality as 'justice for the oppressed' or who go along with it because they do not want to rock the boat? The first take the way of Haman (who claimed he was only trying to protect the king from his enemies), and the second the way of Esther, who thought she could ride out the storm by keeping quiet and waiting for better times to come. In such circumstances, who would choose to be Mordecai - powerless, mocked and in danger of his life, yet right in what he believed and prepared to stand up for it? This is where we Evangelicals find

ourselves in the church today. We must not dismiss the hierarchy as no more than a bunch of Hamans, even if many of them are just that. Hidden away among them are Esthers whose heart is in the right place, and who are in a position to achieve things which we cannot. It is to them that the Mordecais must appeal. If we take a stand, perhaps they too will be encouraged to stand with us. But if we join them in their silence and compromise, then it is certain that we shall perish with them and that God will have to raise up other means by which his will may be accomplished in and among his people. Let us wish the new General Synod well and pray for its members, that they may come to see that like Esther, they have been placed in a position of influence in order to defeat the wiles of Haman by appealing, as we all must, to the Almighty King of kings.

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