
A table of contents for *Anvil* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_anvil_01.php

Forward from Basics: A Future for the Church of England?[1]

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I came across a delicious Miles Kington piece recently. He imagines a conversation with a certain Sir John Potter — an expert on the Conservative Party. They talk about the Prime Minister's 'back to basics' policy. Potter points out that John Major identifies this policy with old-fashioned Tory values, those, Potter says, of the Church of England. When pressed a little as to what these are he continues 'Selling all your assets, throwing all your money away on stupid investments, going deeply into the red, paying your workers slave wages, treating women like dirt, failing to show a lead on anything, not being sure if God exists, having a shady sex life...'. The dialogue continues as Miles Kington intervenes to ask whether these are really the values the Tory party stands for and the imaginary Potter replies rather testily: 'Well, it practises them'.[2]

The Church of England is probably at a lower place in public esteem and in its own morale than for many years. This is for several reasons. Externally it operates in a society which is becoming secular, or perhaps post-secular, with increasing rapidity. Back in 1970 there was the Chadwick Archbishops' Commission on Church and State. While arguing for the right of the Church to have a greater control of its own liturgy and in the appointment of bishops, it was plain that most of its members had an instinctive sympathy with the view that there was what they described as 'a general, diffused, inarticulate, assent to Christianity, in the body of the nation, by people participating in Christian services at birth, or marriage or death, seeking at times to relate their lives to a frame broader than the frame by which they normally live, not thinking of eternity often but, when they do, reaching out to the Church.'[3] In a strong 'Memorandum of Dissent' Valerie Pitt argued that 'for those who live in great conurbations, or among the young, the argument that the doings of the Church of England are central in the lives of our colleagues, our families and our acquaintances is just unreal.' She contended that we are now encountering the third generation of 'urban indifference' and that in this, and I quote in the politically correct language of a 1970 avant-garde

1 Based on a lecture given at Trinity College, Bristol at the MA awards ceremony of the joint MA in 'Church, Religion and Society, 1780-1940' of Trinity College, Bristol and Cheltenham and Gloucester College of Higher Education, 19 March 1994.

2 Miles Kington, 'How to Spot Prime Ministers Past, Present and Possible', *Independent*, 17 February 1994, p 19.

3 Report of the Archbishops' Commission, *Church and State*, CIO, London 1970, para 22.

liberal women, 'a man who involves himself with the Church, who practises his faith does so not with but against the conventions of society and increasingly against the grain of his cultural inheritance.'[4]

The Church of England in decline

Twenty-five years on that conclusion has certainly more force. The Church of England has declined. Its total attendance is below that of the Free churches combined and well below that of Roman Catholicism.[5] What is more revealing is that the figures for baptisms, confirmations and weddings are all down in comparison with ten or twenty years ago. There is a seemingly inexorable decline in children attending church, down by sixteen per cent between 1979 and 1989.[6] The numbers coming to the great occasional attender -services — Christmas and Easter communions — have also moved downward through the seventies and the eighties. Certainly the innate religious tendency of people remains, indeed may even be stronger, but it is less likely to manifest itself in people turning to the Church of England to rediscover echoes from the imprint of some religious past. A primary source of Christian knowledge for many was school but now what one is likely to discover is a mishmash so vague, indefinite and lacking in content that it is hard to imagine it instilling any significant Christian frame of reference. The area in which I minister is middle-class; the process which I have been describing is less advanced. Yet, when one of my colleagues asked at the local controlled church primary school how many of the children knew the Lord's Prayer, only a very few seemed to have any confidence that they did.

Take any index of moral attitudes and the picture is of an enormous change. There are of course contradictions. Most people want more freedom in the area of sexual morality alongside more strictness in the face of crime and more discipline in schools. They want the maximum freedom for themselves and the maximum control over those who would disturb or disrupt that freedom. It is because of that fatal contradiction that the 'back to basics' policy has become derailed. One might have thought that in this moral debate religion would come into its own but it scarcely has, partly because most people do not have a residual Christian base on which to draw, and partly because the churches find it enormously difficult to say anything which will not be ignored because it seems hopelessly vague, laughably fundamentalist or apparently inspired more by party political allegiance than by theological conviction.

If one of the problems is the changing context, another is the huge difficulty the Church of England has in adapting to change on the scale we have known over the last few years. If the Church of England was often thought to be at its best ministering to a Miss Marple-type, middle-class, comfortable, cultivated, moral, rural (and sometimes suburban) culture, it

4 *Church and State*, para 13, 73-4.
5 Peter Brierley, *'Christian' England: What the English Church Census Reveals*, Marc Europe, London 1991, p 35.
6 Ibid., p 102.

has in some senses adapted remarkably well to change through most of the twentieth century as indeed it did through the Victorian era. One of the characteristics of the post-second world war Church of England has been its ability to hold together vast differences partly because its most public figures and institutions seemed to have an urbane durability and moderation about them easily coping with the more dissenting voices, well aware how to adapt to change while appearing to be much the same as they had always been; partly because the main parties had reached a comfortable compromise, often of course saying very rude things about each other but knowing full-well that they had each acquired a niche within the Church from which nobody was likely to prise them, and partly because the Church was cushioned from the reality of declining congregations by inherited wealth and by the Church Commissioners' capacity to invest their resources profitably and by the success in persuading people that they had to give more.

The impact of liberalism

There were of course constant movements which threatened to disrupt this relative calm. One of the most instructive was the controversy in the sixties relating to Bishop Robinson and *Honest to God*. What is remarkable about that controversy, however, is the ease with which it was absorbed and that for three reasons. First, it marked the beginnings of a hegemony of liberalism in the Church of England which was to last for about twenty-five years and, by the same token, it marked the end of the previous liberal-Catholic hegemony. This was accepted almost without a murmur. Mirfield, for example, received *Honest to God* 'warmly' and Alan Wilkinson comments, 'Radicalism was effortlessly over-running the Maginot line of Anglo-Catholic orthodoxy'.[7] Anglo-Catholicism, suggests Hastings, thus 'lost much of its old cohesiveness as a party'.[8] Secondly, John Robinson was in tune with a disrespectful mood, looking for reasons for discarding the heritage of the past and for adopting some high-sounding, if very vague, code for the future. Robinson was the welcome guest on the cult satirical programme *That Was the Week That Was*.[9] His brand of liberal radicalism evidently appealed to the evangelical Methodist minister's son, David Frost, as it did to hundreds of thousands of other like-minded people who wanted to slacken but not entirely discard their ties with a religious past. Thirdly, the Church of England was led by an academic of great spirituality who managed to give the impression that there was a slight problem from a rather naughty prefect which didn't change anything overmuch. 'It's utterly wrong and misleading', he reprimanded the bishop on ITV, 'to denounce the imagery of God held by Christian men and women: imagery that they've got from Jesus himself, the image of God the Father in heaven, and to say that we can't have any new thought until it

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7 Alan Wilkinson, *The Community of the Resurrection: A Centenary History*, SCM, London 1992, p 293.

8 Adrian Hastings, *A History of English Christianity*, 1920-1985, Collins, London 1986, p 555.

9 Eric James, *A Life of Bishop John A.T. Robinson: Scholar, Pastor, Prophet*, Collins, London 1987, pp 124 and 130.

is all swept away.'[10] Nor, from one perspective, did much change. Nobody of significance left the Church of England. Nobody of significance even thought of leaving the church. But from another perspective, as Ramsey came to see, a Rubicon had been crossed. 'A world of half-belief and half-doubt, of searching and questionings', he acknowledged, 'was dug up by *Honest to God*'.[11] The real achievement of Ramsey was to come to be able to speak to that world,[12] while still giving the impression to the traditionalists that he was one of them, as indeed in the last analysis he was. He wrote, in response, *Image Old and New* which acknowledged the main thrust of *Honest to God* by conceding the need to reformulate thinking but which was sufficiently critical to enable the *Church Times* to run the headline: 'Primate Publicly Rebukes Bishop of Woolwich'.[13] But, in retrospect the *Honest to God* affair was a well-managed crisis which allowed liberalism to consolidate its position in the Church without a major fissure.

In the face of these liberal advances Anglo-Catholicism in the seventies declined with extraordinary rapidity. Indeed Hastings describes it as lying 'devastated'.[14] There were sad illustrations of this devastation. One was the resignation in early 1974 of Hugh Bishop, the Superior of Mirfield, because of a crisis of faith and because he wanted to leave the order to live with a former student.[15] Another was the story of Michael Ramsey's retirement to his beloved Cuddesdon only to find that the place had changed utterly because of its acceptance of theological liberalism and an increasing openness to homosexuality.[16] But if this was a crisis, it was largely internal to Anglo-Catholicism. People didn't talk about it very openly and, as far as the institution of the Church of England was concerned, its main effect was to consolidate the advances of liberalism. It was a crisis which was apparently absorbed.

Evangelicalism in the ascendant

Meanwhile evangelicals began to emerge from the ghettos in which they had been hiding for some forty years. Like almost everybody else from the mid-sixties onwards they were increasingly fascinated by a more radical agenda. Being radical for a sixties evangelical meant not leaving the Church of England but rather joining it in a more meaningful way. There were a few voices raised in favour of leaving but the impetus came mainly from outside, from nonconformists such as Martin Lloyd-Jones. Evangelicalism had leadership, in the shape of John Stott, of sufficient credibility and strength of mind and character to see off that challenge without great difficulty. Involvement with the Church of England became the main thrust of evangelical leaders for the fifteen years following the famous National Evangelical Congress at

10 Keith W. Clements, *Lovers of Discord: Twentieth Century Theological Controversies in England*, SPCK, London 1988, p 199.
11 Owen Chadwick, *Michael Ramsey: A Life*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1990, p 372.
12 Clements, op.cit., pp 200f.
13 Ibid., p 201.
14 Hastings, op.cit., p 554.
15 Wilkinson, op.cit., pp 340f.
16 Chadwick, pp 383-5; Wilkinson, p 343.

Keele in 1967.[17] In this they were gradually successful, though there was an inevitable time-delay between leaders emerging who had any interest in the Church of England and their elevation to high office. Their success however was more than institutional. Increasingly it was evangelical parishes which were most successful, most creative and most energetic. One obvious index of this is the rise within a couple of decades of the percentage of evangelical ordinands from about 30 per cent in 1969 to 40 per cent in 1977.[18] Again all this was absorbed into the Church of England which went on, under an increasingly liberal leadership, in tone and feel apparently much as it had ever done.

This growth of evangelicalism continued through the eighties. We have already cited the numbers of ordinands. By the late eighties it was well over 50 per cent.[19] There was the fact, acknowledged in most dioceses, that the parishes which were growing most and giving best were evangelical. There was the increasing number of evangelicals in high office — twelve diocesan bishops by 1993 whereas there were only one or two twenty years ago.[20] There was the reality that they were influential. The phenomenon of David Jenkins is a fascinating example of this. Here we have a man with an evangelical heart, with a conservative past, who in fact had taken up cudgels against John Robinson in the sixties,[21] speaking of the 'great miracles' in a manner which had been accepted as normative by most liberals of the seventies. I remember Bishop John Tinsley of Bristol remarking in a rather pained way that he had been saying this sort of thing for years and nobody had regarded them as particularly noteworthy. That they did take notice in the eighties was due to the interaction of three or four things. First, there was Jenkins's evangelical gifts. He not only said what he said, he said it vividly, memorably, in semi-populist language and with the sense that he wanted others to accept his position. Secondly there was the newsworthy thunderbolt at York cathedral. Thirdly, there was the increasing tendency of the press, much of it anti-Church, to see events in markedly black and white and highly personalized terms. Fourthly, there was the desire of evangelicals to flex their muscles and to demonstrate that what was being said was true neither to the Bible and the creeds nor to the convictions of the ordinary person in the pew.[22] They were heard because they spoke to the climate of the more conservative times as truly as had Robinson twenty years before. It was Jenkins who was misreading the mood of the moment — at any rate within the most active parts of the Church. What he unwittingly provided was a target for the iconoclasm of a new wave of conservatism within the Church. The demonology of conservatism needed Jenkins. The Durham Affair, concludes Keith Clements, 'uncovered not merely a theological issue,

17 Hastings regards the Keele statement as 'one of the most important ecclesiastical documents, not only of the sixties, but of this century' (op. cit., p 554).
18 Peter Williams, 'NEAC3: Retrospect and Prospect', *Anvil* vol. 5, 1988, p 60.
19 Ibid., p 66 n 3.
20 Michael Saward, *The Anglican Church Today: Evangelicals on the Move*, Mowbray, London 1987, p 40.
21 Clements, op.cit., p 206.
22 Ibid., p 232.

but a struggle for power within the Church of England.'[23] And in that struggle the conservative forces were, I would argue, victorious. The standard doctrinal touchstone since 1938 had been the vague liberalism of the 1938 Doctrine Report. In 1986 the bishops issued *The Nature of Christian Belief*. It made no pretensions to be seen as a work remotely of the depth, weight and scholarship of the 1938 report but it was conservative and orthodox in tone and it was in effect a polite episcopal indication that the days of liberalism were numbered.

Another indicator was the debate on sexuality in 1987. There is not the slightest doubt that homosexuality had ceased to be regarded as a bar to ordained ministry in many dioceses, and in some theological colleges. The resolutions passed in Synod in 1987 made clear that the Church of England was committed to the traditional ideal and this has unquestionably had an impact. There is now, so far as I can see, no way in which an active homosexual whose lifestyle is known can be recommended, trained and ordained. It may well be that it happens but, if that is so, it is only because DDOs, bishops, theological Principals and selectors connive at what they know to be against the mind and the clearly expressed will of the Church. All this must and does seem sad to the dominant liberalism of the seventies.

What is happening then is that the leadership is becoming markedly more conservative and evangelical as indeed is the whole tone of the Church of England but, oddly, just as this happens there is a very strong feeling of discontent and malaise not only from those who might be thought to be losing their influence but from those who are nearer to power than they or their ancestors have been for at least one hundred and fifty years. 'Why do we have this strange state of affairs?' 'Why, just as the Evangelicals seemed poised to take up their place as the leading force in the Church of England as the Anglo-Catholics did earlier in the century and the Liberals have done for the last twenty-five years, does the Church of England seem to be in some danger of splintering and why does a significant minority of evangelicals appear to be acting as if the very opposite were true and liberalism was about to triumph in the Church of England?

The nature of the challenge : a cocktail of distrust

For a start it is obvious that the Church of England has been hit at the same time by two major crises. First, there is the reaction of those who oppose the ordination of women. However this is minimized, the sense of crisis which it has engendered by the numbers who have left, who might leave or who might stay as a discontented rump is not calculated to raise morale, increase vision or give the impression of a church which is likely to be, come what may, much the same tomorrow as it was yesterday. Evangelicals leaders in the hierarchy are not widely admired for the way they have handled the issue and this helps to highlight the doubts which we will explore shortly as to how far evangelicals have the capacity to lead. Secondly, there is the financial crisis. Some see it as giving an impetus to a much more radical evangelism

23 Ibid., p 233.

as the Church of England is obliged to face the real world less cushioned by the wealth of the past. That may be the proper reaction of men and women of faith and vision but it is, realistically, likely to be a very different Church of England which faces that real world. Dioceses are faced by savage cutbacks and, to put it mildly, the capacity of the Church of England to be the Church of the whole nation must be increasingly in doubt. To put it another way, the prospect of it becoming one denomination among several is brought measurably closer by this financial mismanagement. What all this means is that evangelicals are entering into the leadership heritage at a point where the Church of England appears to be more divided than at any point since the early eighteenth century and more driven by the consequences of financial decline than perhaps ever before.

A factor in the general situation is that evangelicals are regarded, I believe, with more suspicion on the part of the church at large than were either Anglo-Catholics or Liberals. They have, or are thought to have, a gospel and an ecclesiology which are likely to challenge the *status quo* and at the places where it will be very obvious — in liturgy and in the understanding of ministry and sacrament. After the ritualist excesses of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, moderate Anglo-Catholicism did not appear to threaten overmuch what actually happened in most churches. Liberals have never been very creative liturgically. They may threaten the foundations of the faith for those who understand what they are saying but they do not in the main threaten day to day worship. Indeed liberals often appear to enjoy quite elaborate ritual even though they may accept little of what it is intended to represent. In contrast, particularly in those places where Anglicanism is closest to civic religion — cathedrals and great fashionable churches — there is considerable suspicion about what an evangelical might do. Traditionalists like Charles Moore speak of the ascendancy of evangelicals heralding 'the end of our unique [Anglican] civilization... the raised hands of (George Carey's) charismatics... waving goodbye to that strange and beautiful achievement of politics, piety and aesthetics which was the Church of England'.[24] And this suspicion is more than hostile prejudice. All genuine Christianity is about change and evangelicalism wants to change the institutional church. In particular some (much?) contemporary evangelicalism is manifestly more comfortable with the clearer boundaries of what is often in reality a 'gathered Church' masquerading under the parish label than with the loose, open-textured character of national and civic religion which has so long been an aspect of the Church of England.[25]

One institutional consequence of this suspicion is that there are very few

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24 Peter Beaumont, 'Carey and the Charismatics', *Observer*, 31 March 1991, p 45.

25 One example of this is the way that many evangelicals follow Colin Buchanan in his campaign for disestablishment and for a rigorous baptism policy. This, as some of the reviews to his latest book on baptism (*Infant Baptism and the Gospel: The Church of England's Dilemma*, DLT, London 1993, see for example the *Church Times* review 18 October 1993, p 121) reveal, brings such views into very sharp clash with those who retain the traditional assumptions about membership of the national church. In other generations the vast majority of evangelicals were committed to the establishment and regarded the lay

evangelical deans and, when one is appointed as for example in Peterborough, there is often considerable local unease. Tom Wright, the latest evangelical dean, has recently given a typically reasoned defence of the cathedral's role.[26] I do not suppose he would have felt it necessary to devote his energy to answer a rather intemperate attack on cathedrals had he not thought it possible that some might identify him with the views expressed. The existence of such fears means that evangelicals operate in a context of greater initial distrust. I have a feeling that the attacks on the Archbishop of Canterbury are not much worse than those on some of his predecessors. What may be different are the reservations expressed by unattributed sources apparently very close to him. They reveal the unease and distrust of those who guard the traditional core of the Church and who remain extremely influential. That cumulatively tends to be a factor which makes it harder for evangelicals to lead — at any rate initially. That is exacerbated because they often have comparatively slight experience of leadership outside of an evangelical framework.

The final factor in the cocktail of distrust is the nature of evangelicalism. It has long ago been recognized that evangelicalism is a 'coalition' of really quite distinct strands.[27] Two of these strands — the more pietistic, seen currently in the charismatic movement, and the more reformed seen currently in the Proclamation Trust and Reform — operate most easily when they feel a persecuted minority. How far certain significant elements within them have ever come to terms with the theological pluralism of the Church of England is uncertain. How far have they wrestled with the reality of a church which has the marks of the Church — the gospel being preached and the sacraments administered — but where there is much that they feel does not match their vision of the Church?[28] One mark of this is the incapacity to understand the implications of being a bishop in the Church of England.

'Protestantism' of the national church as a defence against the excesses of 'Catholic', authoritarian clericalism — which indeed it was. Had the church been disestablished earlier, evangelicalism might well have been considerably weaker as it is in many other parts of the Anglican family.

26 Tom Wright, 'Does God Prefer To Listen to Radio 3?' *Church of England Newspaper*, 18 February 1994, p 9.

27 Williams, loc. cit., p 64.

28 This was a fundamental question of the Reformation. The magisterial reformers and their successors in the Church of England such as Richard Hooker had broad and inclusive definitions of the Church (see for example Paul D. L. Avis, *The Church in the Theology of the Reformers*, Marshall, Morgan and Scott, London 1981). This did not mean that they accepted anything. They looked for a 'comprehensiveness' but it had its limits. Jim Packer (*A Kind of Noah's Ark? The Anglican Commitment to Comprehensiveness*, Latimer House, Oxford 1981) and Stephen Sykes (*The Integrity of Anglicanism*, Mowbrays, London 1978) both point to the unfortunate influence, so far as the Church of England was concerned, of F. D. Maurice because he encouraged 'the synthesizing... of apparent theological opposites' (Packer, op. cit., p 21). Packer argues for a comprehensivess of the Elizabethan settlement kind (which incidentally was strongly opposed by most Puritans) characterised by what he calls 'calculated inclusion' which means that the Church is so ordered that it can be a home for all who accept biblical and credal authority (ibid., p 19). However, even in the contemporary church where a Mauricean comprehensiveness is the order of the day, there is, he contends, a strong case for remaining within the church and not 'falling

Despite the objective reality that there are more evangelicals with reformed or charismatic or even Wimberish backgrounds than would have seemed possible ten years ago, many, particularly on the reformed side, have become convinced that there is not a single bishop who understands or reflects their position.[29] It was precisely the problem of the Puritans in the late sixteenth century. They found it very difficult to have any regard for those sections of the Church which were not exactly as they were. Their tendency to divisiveness was exacerbated for the Puritans then and is exacerbated for some now by the 'bishop drain' — that is the removal of those leaders they once regarded with some respect into the outer darkness of episcopal fudge and compromise. Another and related mark is the difficulty they have in perceiving that, as evangelicalism becomes larger and more involved with the rest of the Church it will inevitably become more varied than when it was the distinctive mark of a small and highly defensive grouping.[30]

What basics do we need to return to in the face of this reality of a church which seems in some senses to have a greater vision for evangelicalism than ever before but which also seems to be continually shooting itself in the foot? I want to suggest a number and they come in three categories — first those which relate to theology, secondly those which relate to the institution which we have inherited and thirdly those which relate to our culture.

Theological basics

First, we need to return to that basic which by common consent evangelicals are best-equipped to implement — namely the preaching of the cross in a way which convicts, challenges and changes those who hear. The Decade of Evangelism has not yet run half its course but it would be pointless to deny that there are so many qualifications, particularly in the area of reaching out to other religions, that it is sometimes difficult to be certain what confidence we have in the message we bear.[31] We need to cultivate a vision which is emboldened with the confidence of the gospel of Jesus Christ, which is driven

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victim to the sectarian ideal... that evangelicalism, being Christianity at its purest, ought to practice self-sufficiency in theology, taking nothing from the mixed bag of Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglo-Catholic and liberal Protestant thought on the grounds that nothing in that bag can help evangelicals in the least' (ibid., p 37).

29 Gordon Fyles, 'Reform Remains Opposed to Women in Leadership', *Church of England Newspaper*, 4 March 1994, p 15. 'Reform' wants its own 'flying bishop' (*Church Times*, 4 March 1994, p 1) apparently without any sense of what this might do to separate its followers further from fellow evangelicals.

30 For more on this and how the period leading up to Keele was 'untypically monochrome' as far as evangelicalism was concerned see Peter Williams, *Churchman* 94, 1979, pp 103f.

31 The Archbishop of Canterbury gave a strong lead in his Enthronement sermon when he declared the 'necessity' laid upon him to share his faith in Christ 'with all people' while listening to them and respecting their integrity (George Carey, *Sharing a Vision*, DLT, London 1993, p 4). More recently he has resisted the cultural and religious relativism of John Hick which makes evangelism of other religions always inappropriate. At the same time he recognizes that there are 'proper limits' in evangelism which have sometimes been overstepped by insensitive evangelists ('Talking Together of the Eternal', *Independent*, 5 February 1994). It is a most delicate balance. In turning down the presidency of the Church's Ministry Among the Jews, against the precedent of his predecessors, the

by a concern for the glory of God and which is inspired by a knowledge of the love of Christ. Among many other things that may mean believing in, and signalling clearly that we believe in and are prepared to pay for, an ordained and largely full-time ministry. It is a matter of concern that the new commission to examine the organization of the Church of England seems stronger on businessmen and lay academics than on prophets, theologians and evangelists.[32] We may need better management but only if it is driven by a vision from the Lord.

Secondly, I believe that we need to make it clear that the Bible is our guide and fundamental authority. One of the most frequently articulated worries of those who are uncomfortable with the present state of the Church of England is that evangelicals will transfer the arguments about the culturally conditioned nature of parts of Scripture which have been so important in the debate over the ordination of women to other causes — for example to the question of homosexuality in ministry.[33] The experience of the American and Canadian churches is often cited. Though those churches are very different, the concern is not groundless and there surely needs to be a common understanding of the centrality of the Bible, and its relevance to the wide range of moral and social problems that we face. Of course, in a real sense, all the Bible is 'culturally conditioned'[34] and certainly we all have to wrestle with its particular application to our culture. The fact that is difficult does not mean that it has nothing to say to our problems and we surely need to be seen continually to be returning to it. Too often church leaders, even evangelical ones, seem to be bound by the caution of the manager. They speak in rather woolly sixties sounding sociology rather than in the prophetic dimension which we so desperately need if we are to be faithful to the word of God and if we are to begin to answer the questions which people are actually asking.

Thirdly, we surely need an ecclesiology which has a realistic biblical understanding of how to function in a church which will always fall short of the ideal. If the centrality of the Bible is critical, it is critical in the life of the Church. At the same time the reality from the very earliest days is that God's will has been differently and imperfectly understood within the Church. There were very odd ideas in the Corinthian church which needed to be opposed but which were not a ground for breaking fellowship. One of the exciting things in parish ministry is to see people changing in the context of the fellowship of a church which has all sorts of imperfections but where

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Archbishop has sent out more confused signals and certainly some others on the bench, notably the Bishop of Oxford, give the impression that the evangelism of Jews, for example, should not be on the agenda.

32 For its composition see *Church Times*, 18 February 1994, p 1. The *CT* in an editorial takes consolation from the fact that only three of the thirteen members are ordained. 'Lay people can sometimes take a longer and more practical view' (p 10). The problem is not the balance of laity/clergy but of managers/theologians, prophets etc.

33 See for example, Peter Reiss, 'Sexuality, Symbol, Theology and Culture: A Reply to Francis Bridger', *Anvil* vol. 11, 1994, pp 29-43.

34 N. T. Wright, *Evangelical Anglican Identity: The Connection between Bible, Gospel and Culture*, Latimer Books, Oxford 1980, p 26.

people love the Lord Jesus Christ, seek to relate to him in worship and sacrament and to serve him. The fact that God can work, indeed can only work, in very imperfect institutions is seen in the New Testament, has been demonstrated through church history and has not ceased to be true today.

Fourthly, we need a theology which relates to our created order and to the culture in which we have been placed. We need a theology which is creation-affirming and which takes seriously the fact of common grace — namely that God has a purpose for his world and for society and has created certain institutions such as marriage, the family, the state, to enable this to work effectively.

Institutional basics

If these are theological bases of importance, and I intend, I hasten to say, rather to provoke to thought rather than to be exhaustive, what are the basics in so far as the institution is concerned?

The first is to accept as a starting point the institution which we have. Nobody except God would ever have dreamt up the Church of England but it does, at any rate in principle, bring together Scripture, tradition and reason in a remarkably balanced way. Long ago the Reformers and their immediate heirs fought off the Puritan belief that there were certain prescriptive ways of ministry, of praying and of church government.[35] Instead they saw great value in much of the heritage which had come to them from the past even though it could not be immediately discovered in Scripture. What was important was to establish that this heritage was not against Scripture. What was equally important was to understand that just because something was mentioned in Scripture that did not mean that it had to be restored in all preciseness. Yet still we have some people scraping around looking for an elusive perfect biblical model of ministry and others endlessly creating the expectation that all the New Testament gifts should operate now as then.[36]

If we accept the institution, it does not mean that we cease to try to reform it. That must always be an aim. It does mean that there is a certain realism and even political common sense in what we set out to achieve. It may be, to take one example, theologically correct to make a case for lay presidency at the eucharist, but it shows not the slightest sensitivity to where the great mass of English Anglicans are at to press for it as if it were a matter of the greatest importance. Whatever may happen in Sydney, it will not happen here in the

35 Many Puritans believed in 'the regulative principle' which fundamentally held that 'nothing should be introduced into the government and worship of the Church, unless a positive warrant for it could be found in Scripture' (Iain Murray, *The Reformation of the Church: A Collection of Reformed and Puritan Documents on Church Issues*, Banner of Truth, London 1965, p 38). This was opposed by Cranmer, Ridley and Whitgift and others. There is no doubt that, in so far as it is possible to speak of Puritanism as a common ideology, it tended towards a narrower biblicism and had less of a place for tradition and reason than other early Anglican leaders whose reformed credentials cannot be questioned (see John F. W. New, *Anglicans and Puritans: The Basis of Their Opposition*, Stanford University Press, London 1964, p 21).

36 For a refutation of this view see J. I. Packer, *Keep in Step with the Spirit*, IVP, Leicester 1984, pp 182f.

foreseeable future. It creates great fears and it is a great waste of energy which should surely be engaged in something more useful.

If we accept that the heritage of the past is important because it has been used by God, and because it relates to the instinctive cultural feeling of many, then we cannot abandon it. It is part of the basics which we have been given. It is not taking this God-given heritage seriously to worship as if the very notion of 'common prayer' had long since been discarded. It is not taking this God-given heritage seriously to change beautiful medieval churches into airport lounge lookalikes where soothing schmaltz is the only music which seems appropriate. It is not taking this God-given heritage seriously to act as if there were some category of membership of the Church of England which was open only to those who had completed an exacting course beyond that normally associated with membership. For better or worse the Church of England is not a sect. It is an open-textured body. It is not, finally, taking our God-given heritage seriously to forget that it has often been extremely effective in evangelism and pastoral care.

At the same time we are at a time of great culture change and we cannot, I would argue, merely repeat the past as if nothing had changed around us. It is not taking contemporary reality seriously to expect that plainsong and the glories of Purcell or Tallis will win large numbers of converts. It is not taking contemporary reality seriously to imagine that buildings which express only transcendence and hierarchy are in tune with a theology which makes most sense today. It is not taking contemporary reality seriously to expect that those who have almost no spiritual commitment should continue to have large influence in the appointments of clergy and in the running of churches. It is not taking contemporary reality seriously to fail to acknowledge that traditional methods have not worked, for example in many areas of urban deprivation. In many situations therefore being faithful to the basics of the Church of England requires an evolution which helps people to see the best in the past and the need to go forward in the present.

The evolution will sometimes be gentle, sometimes less so but, if we are taking seriously the heritage in which we stand, it will nearly always be evolution rather than revolution.[37] It will often require cautious compromise. Such compromise is not just a device to hold the over-sixties in church. It may often be an extremely effective instrument of evangelism. One of the evangelistic advantages which the Church of England has inherited is what Gavin Reid calls the 'undemandingness' of the average church. The parish church, he declares, has 'a knack of attracting those whose approach is more casual and nervous, and gently drawing them to faith'; the sort of people, he continues, 'who would run a mile from a "happy clappy" congregation'.[38] The reality is that most people are like this, at least at the start of their spiritual

37 There may of course be some situations, in areas of urban deprivation for example, where almost all the heritage of the past is judged to be irrelevant. It remains important that this conclusion is driven by a concern for evangelism and in consultation with the wider Church and not, as so often, by a desire of an incumbent to demonstrate his independence of the wider Church as represented by authority figures and inherited structures.

38 'A Place to Appeal to the Nervous', *Independent*, 9 March 1991, p 47.

pilgrimage which, typically, takes about four years.[39] They don't like intensity or excessive demonstrativeness. The challenge of course is bring the demands of the gospel at the appropriate time and also not to lose people as they may move into a more 'happy clappy' phase.

A final institutional basic is to realize that the Church of England is not a loose federation of local congregations. It is a church with some sort of (fairly undemanding) authority structure, with expectations about worship, about being the church for the whole parish and whole nation, about clerical dress,[40] and about the vision and support of the total body which cannot be abandoned without the greatest threat to the body as a whole. It may be that some or all of these matters need to be reviewed but this is not best achieved by people acting unilaterally as if there were no canons, no central structure, no system for making decisions and no responsibility to take seriously the less committed members of the congregation and indeed the needs of the parish and nation as a whole.

Managing change of an evolutionary sort is then a key challenge before the Church of England. Evangelicals, for all the reasons we have given, will have a major role in this. In so doing they must not weaken in their characteristic adherence to a biblical, Christ-centered faith, nor in any way diminish their equally characteristic skills in presenting this faith in ways which are culturally appropriate.[41] At the same time they must acquire uncharacteristic sympathy for the institution to which they belong, with all its complex and sometimes ambiguous history, if they are not to disappear as a 'tendency' judged to be ultimately inappropriate to the host body. The present crisis is however so great that, if this were to happen, the Church of England might well not survive in a shape that had any real significance for the future of Christianity in England.

Cultural basics

Space does not allow me say much of the cultural basics save to underline the absolute requirement of listening to our world; of hearing its language, its thought forms, its world-view, its questions, its answers, its pains, its

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39 John Finney, *Finding Faith Today: How Does It Happen*, Bible Society, Swindon 1992, p 25.

40 This may seem to be a different order matter from the other mentioned. In some ways it is but it does represent an area where the church has laid down certain expectations which all clergy promise to follow and which an increasing number of clergy ignore *often with reference to no wider authority than their own consciences*. This is a good example of creeping congregationalism. Indeed it is now not unknown for clergy to be turned down by congregations because they are unprepared to follow the local norm of not wearing robes! There may be good reasons for not wearing robes. The matter has been debated ever since the Reformation but the reasons for acting as if the church allows total latitude when manifestly it does not undermines authority—and that by people who are usually the first to protest when they see authority not being exercised in areas which they regard to be important. The same points could be made by the increasing disregard for any idea of 'common prayer', arguably of course much more important than the issue of vestments.

41 The immense capacity of evangelicalism to adapt to its cultural setting is the thesis of D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s*, Unwin Hyman, London 1989.

aspirations so that we will be able to bring the message of Christ to bear in a way which will challenge. It is what all good and effective missionaries have done since Paul declared that he must be a Greek to the Greeks and a Jew to the Jews. It may be that our postmodernist world actually provides more opportunities to be heard than have been available since the dawning of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment tendency was to a world-view which had no need of a religious explanation. The postmodernist tendency is dismissive of any single overarching certainty. It sees, as Brueggemann argues, that 'the world we have taken for granted in economics, politics, and everywhere else is an imaginative construal.'[42] This conviction, he argues, gives the Church a great opportunity. As a new 'construal' is sought, the role of the evangelist and theologian is to declare the Christian perspective while refraining from 'making too many concessions to the dominant epistemology around us'.[43] Indeed, he continues in words which may excite even the most conservative, our task is to present the 'scriptural material without excessive accommodation — that is, without accommodation to what is politically acceptable or morally conventional, without accommodation to political liberalism or political reactionism, without accommodation to religious orthodoxy or critical urbaneness, but only uttering the voice of the text boldly, as it seems to present itself, even though it does not seem to connect to anything.[44] There is much here that requires to be unpacked but it is a large and exhilarating challenge.

To return to our point of entry, Valerie Pitt rightly said in 1970: 'To be a Christian a man must himself answer — *Jesus is Lord.* Writing "C of E" on a form is not quite enough'.[45] We would all say 'Amen' to that but the fact that we work with people who write 'C of E' rather than, say, 'Jesus Army' means that we and they come with certain basics, however hazy, in our heritage. That gives us a starting place in ministry. These basics must first relate to our biblical and theological inheritance but they must secondly relate to our ecclesiological and cultural tradition. The first must constantly reform the second and both the first and the second have to relate to the reality which lies before us now — our contemporary culture. I believe that, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, it is the working through of that triangle — Bible, tradition and contemporary culture or context as Richard Bauckham would want to call it[46] — which will dictate the future of the Church of England and indeed I dare to say of the Church in England. It will no doubt be a future in many respects beyond our imagining. It should not be a future beyond our thinking, our praying and our obedient acting

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42 Walter Brueggemann, *The Bible and Postmodern Imagination: Texts under Negotiation*, SCM, London 1993, p 17.
43 Ibid., p 20.
44 Ibid., p 21.
45 Pitt, loc.cit.
46 Richard Bauckham, 'Tradition in Relation to Scripture and Reason', in Benjamin Drewery and Richard Bauckham, eds, *Scripture, Tradition and Reason: A Study in the Criteria of Christian Doctrine*, Edinburgh 1988, p 140.