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TIMOTHY YATES

Henry Venn

Timothy Yates considers the legacy of one of the great figures of nineteenth-century mission. This sermon was preached at Holy Trinity, Clapham, on 20 June 1999, to mark the bicentenary year of the Church Missionary Society.

If you visit St Paul's Cathedral and go into the crypt you will find various memorials to great figures in our national life such as the Duke of Wellington, victor of Waterloo. Among them is a bust of a very eminent Victorian, prebendary of St Paul's, son of a rector of Clapham and still far too little recognized as one of the great Anglican leaders of his or any other day. He was named after his grandfather, Henry, who was a great figure in the evangelical revival we associate with John and Charles Wesley, and who had continued in the Church of England with others such as William Grimshaw of Yorkshire and Charles Simeon of Cambridge. So we have a great Venn succession – Henry Venn of Huddersfield and Yelling in Cambridgeshire (where he became mentor and spiritual guide to Charles Simeon); John, his son, rector of Clapham and pastor to William Wilberforce, the Macaulays, Henry Thornton and others of the Clapham Sect as they were called; and our Henry, born in Clapham, baptized here, confirmed here, who preached his first sermon here four years after Waterloo on 28 November 1819, and who became the Honorary Secretary (in effect chief executive) of CMS in the high Victorian years of 1841-72.

I have been asked to speak of Henry Venn's significance for us today, and I begin with those words inscribed on the bust in the crypt of St Paul's: 'stedfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord'. The words come from 1 Corinthians 15, a chapter in which Paul expounds the gospel as he received it: 'first of all I delivered to you what I also received, that Christ died for our sins, that he was buried, that he rose again on the third day according to the scriptures.' In the eighteenth century, people were often categorized according to whether or not they were 'gospel men'. Henry Venn was most emphatically a 'gospel man'. He believed in the New Testament gospel of redemption and resurrection, that Christ died for us and rose again. His whole life was given to the proclamation of the gospel in parishes and through the agency of the CMS. Further, he believed profoundly that the gospel had the power to transform whole societies. He believed that the way was not, as some thought in his time, first to 'civilize', to teach Western manners and mores, and then to evangelize; but rather that the priority was to preach the gospel first and civilization and development would surely follow. In a sermon at the consecration of two bishops for the Far East and Rupertsland in Canada on 29

May 1849, he said 'the preaching of the gospel to all nations and to every creature is the paramount duty of the church of Christ.' So fundamental to everything he was and did was this deep conviction about the Christian gospel, its truth, its priority in mission, its dynamic vitality as a transformative power. He would have echoed Paul's words in the Letter to the Romans: 'I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation to everyone who believes', Jew or Gentile, Yoruba or Ibo, Tamil or Bengali, Chinese or Maori.

In the eighteenth century the contrast was often made between 'gospel men' and 'church men'; during the evangelical revival, you were often seen as either one or the other. Of Henry Venn we must say firmly that he was both – a 'gospel man' and a 'church man'. By this I mean more than that he was a loyal Anglican, though he was that and, among other things, a very committed supporter of the church by law established. But his belief in the church went much more deeply than in any one form of the church, such as the Church of England: his whole strategy of mission was shaped by what we call the *plantatio ecclesiae*, indigenous church-planting. Like other Evangelicals, then and since, he believed profoundly in conversion, the turning of individuals to God in repentance, faith and baptism into Christ. Yet these same believers, converts of the mission field, were to be shaped into churches made up of indigenous believers. These churches were also to be led by indigenous believers, such as Samuel Crowther, the first African bishop in the Anglican Communion, consecrated to Venn's joy (if to Crowther's great misgivings) on 29 June 1864 at Canterbury Cathedral. These churches should become 'self-propagating' (Venn would have been greatly encouraged that since 1997 there has been a new Church of Nigeria Missionary Society) and 'self-governing'. To achieve this 'native church', as Venn called it, he advocated a bottom-up principle: small cells, which he called 'companies', of indigenous Christians, which would then coalesce into larger groupings, paying for their own pastors and becoming an indigenous church. In Venn's view, the way was not to impose a top-down model by hierarchical method, with leadership imposed from outside by, for example, a European bishop, taking with him a whole lot of European assumptions and culturally-inherited forms. Rather, the aim was to give local Christians and local churches freedom to develop and a sense of self-worth, by releasing them from dependency and control by either missionary societies or Western missionaries. In our context, we might on this basis be deeply suspicious of churches which exist simply on imported clergy leadership, unless to match this there is a vital local life, throwing up indigenous leadership which is encouraged, not stifled, by those trained and introduced from outside the local setting – the equivalent of Venn's missionary 'exotic'. Their role, as he saw it, was to make themselves dispensable and move on to those areas where a locally-vitalized church was yet to come into being.

A 'gospel man', a 'church man', and third, a Christian with an international vision. When I was first working on the Venn papers (relating to Daniel Wilson in Calcutta, George Selwyn in New Zealand, Venn's vision for 'native churches' in West Africa, and his correspondence with leaders in northern China and Madagascar), my supervisor suggested that I needed to take a world cruise. But for us, as for Venn, this is a fundamentally important perspective as we approach the new

millennium. William Temple in 1942 called it 'the great new fact of our era', by which he meant that, for the first time in history, there was a church planted in every major ethnic group in the world, a true Christian International. Yes, the church has always been catholic in the sense of universal, but in Venn's period there were the birth-pangs of a new age. At that time, the African churches numbered a few millions, mostly in Ethiopia. Since 1910, the African church has grown from 10 million to 329 million Christians. Similarly, church growth in parts of East Asia has been phenomenal in recent decades. Christians of the twenty-first century have the great privilege, as Venn did in embryo, of a truly international, global vision, one symbol of which has been the 800 bishops at Lambeth in 1998. When Venn came to office in 1841 there nine Anglican bishops 'overseas' and by 1872 there were 51. The increase to 800 gives us some idea that, even as 55 million Anglicans, we should have a world vision.

Finally, this 'gospel man', 'church man' and Christian internationalist was also a Christian worker. It is fashionable today to be critical of the so-called Protestant work ethic. As good Reformation Christians the Clapham Sect would have been the first to say that we are justified by God's grace and not by works. Nevertheless, these men and women had a tremendous sense of their indebtedness to God and their need to make a worthy offering of life in response to so great a salvation. Consider the enormous length of time Wilberforce devoted to the slave trade and its abolition. It took thirty years of his life, culminating in the emancipation of all slaves as he lay on his deathbed in 1833, having handed the leadership of the campaign on to his successor, T. F. Buxton. Equally, although Wilbert Shenk has estimated Venn's correspondence at 6,000 letters, this is only half the story. If you read some of the correspondence, as I have done, you realize the painstaking efforts in very long letters on complex subjects. One letter to Bishop Selwyn of New Zealand ran to 22 pages in his own hand. We know that when he was writing the annual reports on CMS work all over the world he sat up half or all the night making a synthesis which satisfied him. If genius is an infinite capacity for taking pains, then Venn was a genius, and he kept up this devotion to CMS over 31 years. In addition, he had done spells of hard parish work in demanding settings like Drypool in Hull and St John's Holloway in London for seven and twelve years respectively (1827-34; 1834-46). He could never be accused of being an armchair theorist, without knowledge of the praxis of the work of the gospel at the local level.

'Gospel man', 'church man', international Christian, a Christian worker who needed not to be ashamed, giving an extraordinarily high standard of commitment over a lifetime: 'stedfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord.' And, as Paul adds, his labour was not in vain, as today we see churches in West Africa, India, China and Maori New Zealand which bear witness to his efforts.

The Revd Canon Timothy Yates is Chairman of the Editorial Board of *Anvil*

Further reading

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