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# The Doctrine of the Church

Evangelical Insights and Evangelical Oversights \*

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THERE has been more discussion about the nature of the Church during the last twenty-five years than in any similar period during the whole course of Church history. Books on the subject crowd into the mind. There is Flew on *Jesus and His Church*; K. L. Schmidt's important article in Kittel's *Theologisches Wörterbuch*; Thornton on *The Common Life in the Body of Christ*; Daniel Jenkins on *The Nature of Catholicity*; Ramsey on *The Gospel and the Catholic Church*; Hebert on *The Form of the Church*; The Bishop of Oxford and his friends on *The Apostolic Ministry*; Manson's reply in *The Church's Ministry*. More recently has come a notable contribution from an evangelical scholar, F. W. Dillistone, in *The Structure of the Divine Society*, a remarkable volume distinguished alike by the freshness of its approach and the balance of its judgments. These are only some of the striking contributions to the study of the subject, study which has received marked impetus from the contacts between different churches stimulated by the ecumenical movement, and from the practical problems precipitated into the Church's life by actual experiments in Church union, of which South India provides a notable example.

I propose to offer for consideration four evangelical insights into the Church's nature, and four evangelical oversights. Not that all evangelicals share the insights or are guilty of the oversights. They are merely aspects of an inheritance which we ought to treasure, and pitfalls into which we, more than others, can easily slip.

## I

### EVANGELICAL INSIGHTS

The evangelical has been given an insight into the priority of *the spiritual to the formal*. He is anxious not to fall into the state of those mentioned in 2 Timothy 3. 5, who are described as "having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof". This applies all along the line, e.g., in sacraments, in services, and in sermons.

In sacraments, the evangelical is nervous of an undue emphasis of the mere doing of the deed itself. The words in the baptismal service, "This child is now regenerate" are apt to stick in his theological gullet. Is he really?—he tends to ask. Is it as simple as all that? "Thou hast vouchsafed to feed us who have duly received these holy mysteries with the spiritual food of the most precious body and blood"—has He so vouchsafed, if so for all or for some, and under what conditions? He is never content with the merely outward. He remembers that God looketh on the heart, and he sees each man's spiritual Odyssey as a personal encounter with the living God.

\* A paper read at the Oxford Conference of Evangelical Churchmen, April, 1952.

In services generally, while he may be loyal to the *Book of Common Prayer*, and while he may appreciate its beauty and dignity, he does not think naturally about the mere "saying of an office", as though that in itself were pleasing to God. He has an almost prophetic revulsion for trust in any form of cultus. He thinks rather of what is actually going on in the minds and hearts of the worshippers. Are they really offering to God that sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving which is their rational service? Do they understand what they read, or what is read to them? Do they sing with the spirit, and with the understanding also?

So in the sermon. The evangelical is not content with a few "helpful thoughts" on the Collect for the day. He wants his sermon to be like Beethoven's Solemn Mass, which was inscribed, "From the heart, may it go to the heart". He seeks not only to inform the mind, but to stir the will and disturb the conscience, to move the affections and warm the heart.

This emphasis on the real, the personal, and the spiritual elements in religion is an evangelical inheritance. Others may reach similar ends by other routes, but if he is any sort of real evangelical, he will always respond to an emphasis on these aspects of our religion.

Then he will perceive the supremacy of *Scripture over Tradition*. During the Middle Ages, whatever may have been said in theory, tradition gained a marked supremacy over scripture. One of the great achievements of the Reformation was to dethrone tradition as a self-governing power, and to bring it firmly under the control of the scriptures as an authoritative *norm*. In recent years Gregory Dix and others have made repeated attempts to undermine this position. They use a subtle, but specious argument. They point out that the Canon of Scripture—i.e., the New Testament—was not finally fixed till the fourth century, and that by then, the rites and customs of the Church were fully established. If then—so runs the argument—for three centuries the Church could organize its life by *tradition*, we must turn first to this tradition to see what the primitive institutions were, what they meant, and what they should be or mean to-day. There are a number of fallacies in this argument. (a) The Canon recognized an acceptance of the books in question as an established fact, and therefore the date of the Canon is not the earliest date at which a book became authoritative. (b) Whatever was the situation then, the modern position is clear, and the Anglican position definite. The scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are regarded as of unique authority. Even the Apocryphal works do not stand on quite an equal footing. (c) The New Testament writings, on any showing, are quite the best evidence available for the life and practice of the primitive Church.

The evangelical then will affirm and maintain that in God's Providence, and under His guidance, the New Testament writings came into existence, and were accepted, and that the Church must also stand under the judgment of those books, being the embodiment and record of the saving act of God in the gospel. This is not to say, as did the Puritans in Hooker's time, that every detail of Church life is to be controlled by what is described or prescribed in the Bible. It

does mean that the life and customs of the Church must not be contrary to the essential nature of the Church as put before us there. It does mean that the tradition of the Church must always be under the control of the Biblical *norm*. A development like that of the doctrine of the Assumption would be ruled out. Here is a clear case of the development of a doctrine through the uncontrolled piety of the masses. It came from below, and was later promulgated from above, being judged, by a great *tour-de-force*, to be consonant with the implicit (not the explicit) teaching of scripture. A Church which gave real authority to the scriptures could hardly have been betrayed into such an aberration.

Thirdly, the evangelical believes in the *ecumenical rather than the narrowly ecclesiastical*. This is a most vital issue at the present time. The Church of England has to adjust itself to two major developments : (1) the growing importance of the ecumenical movement—the *World Council* abroad and the *British Council* at home—with all the satellite activities which have grown up round these two bodies ; and (2) the development of actual schemes for reunion in which Anglican relationships are involved. We think at once of South India, and we might also bring into our thoughts our relations with the Church of Scotland and the English Free Churches. At many points the Anglican has to face a choice between the apparent welfare of his own church, and the welfare of a larger group of Christian bodies, who are planning either co-operative action or actual reunion.

Now the evangelical is not compelled to rush bald-headed into every crack-brained scheme of co-operation or reunion. Like his Anglo-Catholic brother, he has a real conception of the heritage which the Anglican Church treasures, and he is no more keen to jettison it than he. But when it really comes to the point, he will always tend to take the broader view. He cannot work on the assumption that his Church is *the Church* which Christ founded, in the sense that the other great Christian bodies are mere *dissecta membra*. We cannot deal with all the subtle difficulties raised by this question, but we can surely affirm the simple belief that the Church of God—in Britain, for example—is not confined to “that pure and reformed part of it *established* in this Kingdom”. Somehow or other the other great traditions have got to be found a place within it. And to find them such a place is in line with the *spirit* of historic anglicanism if not its letter. In the sixteenth and seventeenth century (until the end of the latter) the Church of England did not contemplate the existence of other bodies on its own territory, and I do not want to under-rate the difficulties which such existence has produced, both practically and theologically. But it did have to deal with Lutheran and Reformed communities abroad, and as Prof. Norman Sykes has shown in his pamphlet, *The Church of England and Non-Episcopal Churches in the 16th and 17th Centuries*, its custom was to enter into relations with them, to allow and even encourage communion with them. Often enough it regretted their lack of historic episcopacy, but seldom did it allow this lack to deprive them of the right to count as real branches of the Church Catholic. All the statements in the Prayer Book about the Church refer to the whole Church, and if the Catholic Church has

in fact disintegrated to a great extent since Prayer Book days, we must assume that the Church's claims are, as it were, held in commission by all the great Christian bodies of our land. The frank acceptance of this is what I mean when I speak of the priority of the ecumenical over the purely ecclesiastical.

Fourthly, the evangelical looks *forward to the future, not merely back into the past*. He is concerned with prospect as well as retrospect. We must not overplay our hand while speaking of this matter. Clearly the priority attached to the scriptures, and the controlling authority afforded to the apostolic *Kêrugma*, compel us to look back. As loyal Anglicans, too, we shall attach weight to the patristic witness, and to the deliveries of the first four General Councils. But we are well aware that there is no golden age in the past when divisions were unknown, and to which we can invite return, by merely calling on the separated bodies to blot out their three centuries of existence. We are attracted by Wedel's idea of *The Coming Great Church*, realizing, of course, that no coming Church can really be any other than the Church for which Christ shed His blood, the same from age to age. But in the realm of the empirical manifestation of that unity, the idea of the coming great Church is helpful. It is the idea we have tried to develop in *The Fulness of Christ—the Church's growth into Unity*. As has been said by Canon Turner of Durham, there is an *intensive* catholicity as well as an *extensive*, and we can never measure catholicity in terms only of outward organization.

It is this vision of a growing, deepening unity that marks us out from the more rigidly minded Anglo-Catholics of our Church. For them the Church of England has need of nothing: it has all, and abounds. Its only possible need is recognition by Rome and the East, and possibly the return of those separated by schism from her. The idea of a great Church of the future, to which our Church, and other Churches shall bring their honour and glory is one which we can entertain more easily than they. One reason why this is so is the fact that we always distrust neat, tidy, logical schemes when applied to spiritual realities. When we have done all, we admit that we see through a glass darkly. We believe that Jesus our Lord "founded a Church", at least in the sense that He commissioned the twelve as the nucleus, with Himself, of the New Israel. We believe that the Holy Spirit has been at work in the Church, leading it into deeper understanding of the truth, and bestowing on it a continuous ministry, as one pledge of its unity down the centuries and across the continents. But when it comes to making *exclusive* claims, and to drawing negative assumptions about those outside, we draw back. There is much that we do not know. When we have done all, we are unprofitable servants, and perhaps we can be more profitable by acknowledging some others as His servants, too.

## II

### EVANGELICAL OVERSIGHTS

Let us now discuss some of those aspects of the doctrine of the Church which seem to me important, and which are minimized or

played down, sometimes overlooked or ignored by evangelicals. I do not want to make sweeping generalizations, and I speak subject to correction. But I see little point in evangelicals meeting to exchange views which are identical, and going away with no wider vision than that with which they came. If the points I am going to make now do not carry conviction, I hope at the least we shall ask ourselves where they are wrong, and why they do not. Then at least we shall have gone through the bracing experience of self-examination, and shall be more sure that our convictions are based on reason and knowledge, and are not merely prejudices masquerading as beliefs.

As the first oversight, then, let me suggest that evangelicals tend to undervalue *the institutional element in the New Testament*. Undoubtedly the most important cause of this is the evangelical stress on personal faith and conversion. The texts which bring out the necessity of this are, and always have been, household words in evangelical circles, and while such an emphasis need not be opposed to a strong view of the Church, in practice the Church usually is thought of as the fellowship *resulting from* a number of conversions, rather than that prior reality into which converts come. Another factor which leads to the same result is the now not-quite modern view that Jesus did not intend to found a Church, and that passages which suggest that He did are the result of later editorial processes. Thus passages like St. Matthew xvi. 18, 19, were, until recently, considered almost certainly redactorial, and dogmatic assertions based on them discounted. Other contributory elements have been the distinct preference of evangelicals for the prophetic, as against the priestly elements in the whole range of biblical writings, and the violent reaction not unnaturally produced by medieval corruption, by fanciful exegesis, and by tractarian romanticism.

Against all this, however, important currents of theological thought are now strongly flowing. One of these is the new understanding of the word *ecclesia*, as set out, e.g., in Schmidt's article in Kittel's Word Book, or in Johnston's book on *The Church in the New Testament*. We now understand that *ecclesia* is a word shot through with Septuagint associations, and that it means, in brief, the people of God, i.e., in the New Testament, the new Israel, the newly-chosen people. Once this is understood, a great deal of the New Testament takes on a new colouring, and it becomes quite impossible to separate the message to the individual from God's purpose for His Church. Again, we now begin to understand the corporate nature of the expectation associated with the Son of Man around the time of our Lord's life. In Daniel, the Son of Man is a corporate entity, the saints of the Most High, and although in our Lord's teaching the corporate hope depends for its fulfilment on Christ's own fulfilment of the hope, it remains true that the hope is a corporate hope. This affects the interpretation of many biblical passages, and indirectly affects the dogmatic formulations which arise from the biblical material.

Again, we are all now agreed that the Church of the Epistles is a visible and not an invisible Church. I am not sure whether I should wish, as a private individual, to go as far in support of the idea of the invisible Church as we went in *The Fulness of Christ*. The only

positive values I can now see in the idea are (1) the reminder of the existence of that part of the Church which is invisible because it is within the veil; (2) the reminder that all human judgments are fallible, and that while we must look on the outward appearance, the Lord looketh on the heart. But I affirm that when the New Testament speaks of "the Church", it means the actual, empirical, local or universal Church, with all its sins, negligences and ignorances, such as we find so vividly displayed in 1 Corinthians. To members of such a Church St. Paul says, "*Ye are the temple of God*", not "Ye are the unworthy outward representatives of an invisible temple known only to God", but "*Ye are the temple of God*".

Finally, under the points which lead us to a stronger sense of the institutional side of the New Testament, we should have to put the greater importance now seen to attach to the sacraments. It has often been said in the past that if the Holy Spirit had intended the Holy Communion to be central in the life of the Church, He would have inspired the writers of the epistles to refer to it more than twice, which is the only *certain* number of references. Now, however, we see that the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion were so central that they are nowhere out of mind. Oscar Cullmann, one of the foremost Swiss New Testament scholars, has written a book (*Urchristentum und Gottesdienst*) which expounds the *whole* of St. John's Gospel (not just chapter vi.) as a commentary on Baptism and the Eucharist as the symbols and the means whereby the primitive Church was regularly united with Christ and nourished with His more abundant life. We need not follow each new fashion, but we must not cling to a doctrine of the Church which is based on a slightly outmoded form of biblical exegesis.

It is notable that some of the best work in the Church in the New Testament has been done by liberally minded Free Churchmen. Until F. J. Taylor and F. W. Dillistone wrote their books, Evangelical Churchmen have fought shy of this field.

I come to the second evangelical oversight. On the whole they have failed to understand *the theological significance of Episcopacy*. There has been no practical rejection of the institution of Episcopacy—Evangelicals, *in practice*, pay far more reverence to their Bishops than do Anglo-Catholics—but there has been very little *theological* defence or exposition of it. Evangelicals tend to accept it as a venerable custom, practically efficient. Is this enough? And are they prevented, by their conviction, from taking a more positive view of it? Surely not. Quite apart from the fact that the universal acceptance of it for fifteen hundred years *may* indicate—I do not say more—the guidance of the Spirit, can we not say that the historic episcopate symbolizes, and to some extent secures, the unity of the Church under Christ, its living Head? Certainly an episcopal Church has a strong protection against that parochialism and congregationalism which all too easily comes to occupy the vision of the local church, and makes it harder for the Church to realize its wider character. Support for missions must rest at last on the vision of the universal Church, and the oversight of considerable areas by one pastor ought to help the individual congregations to realize the claims of the larger group.

Furthermore, bishops symbolize the fatherly, authoritative note in Church government, and no one can read the New Testament without realizing that this has a real place. The word *hupotasso*, "Submit", occurs 37 times in the New Testament, and we must not assume that the New Testament Church was an anarchic institution, where every man was a law unto himself. Atomistic individualism may have been a popular craze in political thought in the 19th and previous centuries, but it can certainly claim no apostolic authority.

The third oversight to which I would draw attention is what I call, rather clumsily, *the implications of historic realism*. What do I mean by that? Something like this. The principle of the Incarnation, and the Atonement necessitated that the saving acts of God had to have "a local habitation and a name". They took place in Palestine, at a certain date, and the flesh which Jesus took was that which he received from one particular Jewish maiden. He called and commissioned twelve particular men. The challenge that they gave was to believe in God's particular act on Calvary in the year 29 A.D., and to show it in one particular way, by being immersed in water. The Christians met on a particular day, and this necessitated a particular place, though it may have been but a riverside, or a large room in a private house. Now every one of these items might be challenged from the point of view of Hegelian idealism. Hegel might claim that absolute truth could not be historically mediated, but as far as the Incarnation and Atonement are concerned we should not agree. But do we stop there? Are we afraid of biblical realism when it is applied to the sacraments? It has been pointed out by Leonard Hodgson that if an early Christian had been asked whether it was faith or baptism that saved, he would have thought it a nonsense question. For him, the two were one, fused together in an inseparable complex.

We are so afraid of relapsing into a superstitious formalism, into an *ex opere operato* view of sacraments, that we tend to undervalue the divinely appointed means of grace. Now it is quite true that in times of evangelical revival there have been great revivals of sacramental life—the Wesleyan movement is rightly quoted in support of this—but it still is a fact that our stress usually falls on what the sacraments are *not*, rather than on what they are. It is a well known fact that evangelical ordinands need educating in the matter of regular and faithful participation in the Holy Communion in a way that those brought up in a higher tradition certainly do not. The evangelical ordinand is often further on in such things as personal Bible Study and personal evangelistic witness, but must it be always a case of *either-or*? You sometimes see in Evangelical vestries the familiar words "Mine the mighty ordination of the pierced hands". A beautiful thought, humbling and empowering. But am I not right in thinking that this is also meant to suggest that the humbler ordination at the Bishop's hands is something to be kept very much in the background, something which one must be very careful not to overrate? May it not be that the ordination by the pierced hands does in fact take place—is in fact mediated—by the laying on of the hands of the Bishop? Certainly let us beware of a too hasty identification of the outward with the inward, but also of a too-hasty separation between them.



There is a remarkable potency in a religion where evangelical personal reality is wedded to a full and strong sacramental system, and I covet it for our evangelical tradition.

Lastly, I feel that we sometimes overlook *the limitations of our freedom within Anglicanism*. Now I want to be very clear in this last short section of my paper. I do not believe that progress towards re-union can be indefinitely delayed by the intransigence of a small section of Anglo-Catholics. I do *not* believe that our pace must always be that of the slowest member. I do not believe that we must accept all the restrictions of Tractarian and post-Tractarian Ecclesiasticism, as though it were historic Anglicanism. I do not believe that the individual Anglican should lightly surrender time-honoured liberties. But I also feel that there are limits to what we can claim at any one time while we are all together in the Anglican Communion. We must not *lightly* risk a serious split in our own Church, for that would be a strange way of working for re-union. What we must do is to keep in close fellowship with all those who will have fellowship with us, and remember that a small step forward by the whole Church is likely to bear richer fruit than a big step forward by an insignificant minority. This means patience and some surrender of what we might like to do if we were entirely on our own. But "the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it", and we must have long patience for the precious fruit of reunion. For "where envying and strife is, there is confusion, and every evil work. But the wisdom which is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, without hypocrisy. And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace to them that make peace."