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Editorial

The Changing Church

IT IS A COMMONPLACE that the church is going through a period of almost unprecedented change. There is scarcely an activity in which it engages which has not come under the microscope in the last few years. It has been asked whether it is being done well, whether it could be done better or whether it should be done at all. The impact of all this questioning and desire for reform has been particularly severe upon the Church of England, because it is only comparatively recently that it has possessed the machinery to put reforms into effect. Consequently the new synods are jammed with an enormous amount of business dealing with matters of great importance to the church. It is not therefore surprising that many clergy and laity, particularly but not exclusively those of an older generation, view the present situation with foreboding or even with alarm.

If the tag of 'the Tory party at prayer' has usually been a slightly unfair one to apply to the Church of England, it is nonetheless true that the form of the national church which we have known in the past has been closely related to a stable structure of society with people knowing their own position. In the last few years technological and economic changes have led to a surge of anti-institutionalism which has affected everything from Westminster to Wimbledon. Tradition and formality are now at a discount, and relevance and spontaneity are 'in'. This new mood has been bound to affect the church at almost every level.

It is not difficult to mount a critique of our modern society from a Christian point of view and therefore to argue that the church should keep itself immune from the sort of changes that are going on all around. Indeed it seems clear that many people have in recent years found the church a welcome haven of stability in a bewildering sea of change. It is however doubtful whether this is really the function of the church. Some groups in Christian history have tried to opt out

of changes in technology and economics but their influence has normally been almost non-existent outside their own tightly enclosed community. The Anglican ethos has been that there is a close link between the church and the society which it seeks to serve. The trouble is that the church is often a step behind society and in the recent period of change has fallen several paces to the rear. Yet the people who form the church, and this is now increasingly seen to mean the laity who have to live and work in the modern world, are inevitably partly children of their own age. To ask them to abandon all their thought-processes and social patterns when they come into the church is a prescription for isolationism and for ultimate disaster.

The doctrine of God the Father reminds us that there is a given Christian philosophy of the world. The doctrine of God the Son that there are given historical facts of redemptive significance, and a given interpretation of them in the New Testament. But the doctrine of God the Holy Spirit speaks to us of God our contemporary, active in and through history and enabling the people of God in every generation to understand and apply the great objective facts of the Biblical faith. It is the Holy Spirit who is an agent of change in the church. That is different from saying that all change is caused by the Holy Spirit. The New Testament is full of 'warnings' that what claims to come from the Holy Spirit must always be tested. No wedge should be driven between the Bible and the Spirit. The Church of England has always maintained that there are many things about the form of the church which are secondary. We should therefore be ready to accept changes in those areas when it is clear that they no longer serve the purpose for which they were instituted, provided that what is proposed in their place is not inconsistent with New Testament principles.

One of the greatest pressures on the church at the moment is the financial one. We may not doubt that most of us are guilty of a failure in stewardship, but appeals to the conscience of church people for more money will not necessarily solve the problem. It is at least possible that the Holy Spirit is using this most potent means to force the church to rethink its use of buildings and manpower, which are the most costly items in its budget. While one would not lightly destroy the provision for pastoral care which has been made over the centuries through a largely full-time professional ministry, nor would one readily demolish places of worship which have many associations helpful to a great number of people, it is at least conceivable that in the long term the Holy Spirit will reduce reliance on these and so help the people of God to be more truly in themselves the Church. (But it must not be in the 'difficult' areas that resources are withdrawn.) What may emerge from a fairly long and traumatic experience of reform could be a church which is much nearer to the New Testament essentials than we have known for a long time. If there is need for cool heads and for vigilance there should also be the readiness for adventure. In

whatever situation we find ourselves God is greater than it. It is faith and hope, not fear, which are the Christian virtues.

Demise of E.F.T.L.

MANY readers of *The Churchman* were also members of the Evangelical Fellowship for Theological Literature and will be sorry to read of its dissolution. The fellowship was founded thirty years ago at a time when very little theological writing of a serious nature was being produced by Evangelicals of any kind. Over the years it has done much to promote a scholarly contribution to the life of the church, and it is perhaps this very fact which has in the end hastened its demise. The views of the liberal majority have been so much accepted in the mainstream of church life that they are not now thought of as saying anything strikingly distinctive. The conservative element has always been smaller and has tended to make its literary contribution through other groups in which there has been recently a more exciting pioneering spirit. The fellowship was valuable for helping liberal and conservative evangelicals to hold dialogue together but more than that was needed for a *raison d'être*. The execution was in fact sharp and sudden but this may be a better way of dealing with Christian institutions that have passed their prime than leaving them to a long period of senescence and ultimate decay. Perhaps committees of other bodies ought to be asking themselves whether they any longer serve the purpose for which they were founded, thirty, fifty or a hundred years ago.

Why Not?

THIS is the pertinent question raised by the book of which the full title is: *Why Not? Priesthood and the Ministry of Women*, edited by Gervase Duffield and the late Michael Bruce. The material has appeared by instalments in the pages of *The Churchman* over the last two or three years and is soon to be published by Marcham Manor Press, who hold the copyright of the three articles in this issue belonging to it. A fair amount has been written advocating the full ordination of women and this material is offered in the hope that the debate in the General Synod in the autumn will concentrate on the theological principles in a field which is so exposed to emotionalism and prejudice.

The *Editor's note* on page 89 is Mr. Duffield's.

R.E.N.