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Richard John Coates

—in memoriam

ROGER BECKWITH

The Reverend Richard Coates, whose death in his sixty-eighth year took place on 21st February 1977, was known to readers of *Churchman* by his thoughtful contributions to its pages, and to the wider Anglican and evangelical public as a scholar, teacher and pastor of distinction; though of recent years ill health caused him to withdraw somewhat from the public eye. Always an unmistakable Irishman, 'Paddy' Coates had an outstanding ministry both in Ireland and in England. He was one of that notable company of Irish evangelicals who, inheriting the Protestant principles and scholarly traditions of the Church of Ireland, but spending much of their working lives in England, have greatly strengthened the evangelical witness in the Church of England also. The writer of this account was one of his pupils, but most of the information in it has been contributed by other friends of Richard's, by former colleagues of his, or by his wife Louie.

It was as a lively young man in the parish of St Paul's, Dublin, where the ministry was faithful but by no means exciting, that Richard was converted, along with others of his own age, during a quite remarkable revival in the parish. This came about through the ordinary ministry of the church and the witness of converted individuals. The new Christians formed themselves into a prayer group, devoted themselves to the study of the Bible, and sought the conversion of others, including, of course, their Roman Catholic neighbours. Richard also linked up with the strongly evangelistic Dublin YMCA. The fact that his conversion took place within the life of his own parish church, and the opportunities which he then began to take to sit under the biblical and solidly reasoned ministry of T. C. Hammond at the mission church of the Irish Church Missions in Dublin on Sunday evenings, confirmed him in his churchmanship and influenced his evangelistic outlook. Having been converted himself without the help of any special evangelistic campaign, he would sometimes, in later years, tell those who asked him for his evangelistic strategy, that it was 'births, marriages and deaths'. He always made full use of the evangelistic opportunities of the occasional offices, believing strongly in the spiritual benefits of baptism when set in the context of faithful teaching, and regarding baptismal rigorism as a serious mistake. With this, he was a strong defender of the English church-state relationship.

Preacher and pastor

Already as a layman, he manifested great gifts as an open-air evangelistic preacher. After he had trained for ordination at the Bible Churchmen's College, Bristol (1931-33) and had been ordained to a curacy in the Manchester diocese (1933-35), he manifested equal gifts in his pulpit ministry. He held five incumbencies in England: Christ Church, North Brixton (1940-43), Rawtenstall (1947-52), Christ Church, Weston-super-Mare (1952-60), Kirkheaton (1962-64) and Great and Little Abington (1971 to his death). One who knew him well at Weston-super-Mare writes: 'He was by far the best preacher in the Locking deanery, and our folk could never have enough of him. His firm gospel messages were illustrated by lots of sparkling anecdotes, which were very telling, because they came from real-life Catholic-Protestant confrontations in Ireland.' He had a remarkable knowledge of the Bible; biblical commentaries (of which Alexander Maclaren's were special favourites) had an honoured place in his excellent library; and his preaching was always biblical and expository. At the same time it was always relevant, for he was good at applying Scripture to current problems, and at thinking up clear, crisp headings.

In his parochial work he proved a faithful pastor. As far as possible he spent every afternoon visiting in the homes of his parish, where he always read the Scriptures and prayed. He delighted in the meeting for prayer and Bible study, in which he regularly took his people through books of the Bible. He had a great concern for individuals, and would travel any distance to help someone. He took much interest in those who he thought would be able to influence others, and was generous to younger clergy both with time and with books. His curates found in him a true friend, who was conscientious in preparing them for their future ministries. In matters of churchmanship, he stood firm on Reformation principles; and was not afraid to stand up to Anglo-Catholic bishops regarding their dress at confirmations in his church.

Scholar and leader

His studies were not confined to the Bible, but he had an excellent knowledge of the writings of the Fathers and the Reformers. Like his teacher Dr Sydney Carter, he was attached to the High Church divines of the seventeenth century, and held that their sympathies were basically Protestant. He was interested in church history, especially the history of evangelistic effort in Ireland and of conflict in that country, and he never shrank from speaking up (in the Republic or elsewhere) for the universally maligned Protestant community in Ulster. He was deeply interested in the older reformed devotional and

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catechetical literature. He was especially well versed in liturgy, and loved the Prayer Book, which he invariably used, and on which he lectured with distinction at his old college in Bristol throughout his ministry at Weston-super-Mare. In doctrine, his early circumstances naturally led him to concentrate on the Roman controversy. All these interests were well represented in his library, a handsome part of which, in accordance with his wishes, has now been donated by his widow to Latimer House, the evangelical Anglican research centre at Oxford, of which Richard was the first warden. He was a natural choice for this post, which he held from 1960 to 1962. However, he found it too lonely, and so returned to work where he would have more direct contact with people.

The fruits of his studies appeared not only in his oral teaching but in his writings. Many excellent booklets and articles came from his pen, such as *Reservation* (Fellowship of Evangelical Churchmen, 1959), *Rome and Marriage* (Church Book Room Press, 1967) and 'The Irish Troubles' (*Churchman*, Winter 1970). However, the most important of his writings are his unpublished Bristol MA thesis *The Origin and Development of Archbishop Cranmer's Eucharistic Doctrine* (1956) and his still-unanswered contribution on 'The Doctrine of Eucharistic Sacrifice in Modern Times' to the volume *Eucharistic Sacrifice* (ed. J. I. Packer, CBRP, 1962).

The crown of his ministry, probably, was his work as the superintendent of the Irish Church Missions at Dublin. He held this post twice, from 1943 to 1947 and again from 1964 to 1971. Here his gifts both as a teacher and as an open-air evangelist had full scope. In this work, no less than in his parochial work, he was inspired by his love of men and his desire to win them for Christ and build them up in the truth. In his earlier term he had boundless energy and worked as if everything depended on his efforts, though it would be hard to think of anyone more conscious of the sovereignty of God. Important activities were the services at the mission church, the traditional class for the exposition of the Hundred Texts, and the open-air meetings; but much of the work was then with orphans and children. He was to have four children of his own, and had a great love for children. He liked to have children present at baptisms, but when people spoke of bringing them to the rails at Holy Communion, he would say that this was the wrong sacrament for them. In his second term he was weaker in health, but his wisdom proved ample compensation for his physical disabilities. Many have noted that he was a wise counsellor, good at getting to the root of problems, and clear evidence of this is seen in his decision (much questioned at the time) to sell the old mission church and buildings in Townsend Street and buy the present fine premises in the strategic area of Bachelor's Walk. Here he encouraged some remarkable evangelism, pioneered by one of his assistants, which reached some of the most rough and difficult teenagers

in Dublin and gained commendation from the police and admiration from Roman Catholics.

Open to dialogue

He showed his wisdom also, in his second term of work, by his sympathetic understanding of the changing face of Rome. He delighted in the new opportunities of bearing witness to his Protestant faith in Roman Catholic seminaries, where his open-mindedness impressed Roman Catholics as much as his scholarship. When he first returned to Ireland, one of his colleagues writes, the Second Vatican Council was already in progress, but:

signs of change were much less marked than on the continent or even in England. There seemed little direct influence of the Bible either on the public worship or on the private devotion of the Roman Catholic Church. Official contact between Roman and non-Roman clergy was in its infancy, and the archdiocese of Dublin was one of the most rigidly controlled in the whole Church of Rome. He was perceptive in seeing that change was inevitable, despite appearances, and he set himself to use the evolving situation to the full. He saw the opportunity for serious theological discussion, free of acrimony, with leading Roman Catholic teachers. Many of these were only too willing to hear what Protestants had to say, and he grasped the vital importance of ensuring that the evangelical view did not go unheard. His past experience in Ireland guarded him against a naive simplicity, whilst his experience elsewhere made him alert to the need for creating avenues of goodwill and for participating fully and responsibly in dialogue (then a new word in Ireland) with Rome.

Within this atmosphere it would have been easy to be falsely accommodating and to neglect the work of evangelism. This he did not do, and the results justified his faithfulness. For the more relaxed and tolerant religious atmosphere in Dublin was reflected in less hostile and often enquiring audiences.

It has been mentioned that he was himself an excellent open-air evangelist. He had a fine voice, and was not dependent on loud-speakers. He was forthright, pungent and witty, and knew how to hold a crowd and to deal good-humouredly with objectors. Bystanders got to know him, and many, young as well as old, who paid little attention to other speakers, listened carefully to him. He had the ability to be forceful without being offensive; he could, for example, criticize a Roman doctrine, and make his meaning clear, without mentioning it by name. In public debate of all kinds, he was always prompt but never acrimonious; and he would try to speak afterwards to anyone with whom he had publicly disagreed, in order to show that there was no personal animosity. Moreover, he was never slow to lighten the atmosphere with humour, and could when he wished keep going for hours telling jokes.

All in all, as one of his friends writes, he was a splendid, hearty, robust Christian brother, and the world will be much the poorer for his passing.

ROGER BECKWITH is Warden of Latimer House, Oxford.