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Editorial

Many tributes have been paid to Robin Nixon and I, who follow him in this particular sphere, remain admiring of and grateful for his skills and dedication. One indication of these is that the present number still bears, very largely, the marks of his forward planning.

A clerical élite

Bishop Newbigin's stimulating article in this issue reminds us how easily a professional clerical *élite*, which aligns itself 'with the privileged elements in society', is created. In the context of this article he connects this primarily with the process of training, but he would, no doubt, not disagree that the process of selection and the ideals of the ministry which control both selection and training are equally important. The problem of a clerical *élite* is, of course, that it is far better at evangelizing the privileged than the poor, a reversal of the early church experience.

It is widely recognized that one of the reasons for the general failure of the Church of England to reach either the urban or the rural poor over the last one hundred and fifty years has been the social superiority of the typical parson. James Obelkevich, for example, in his recent study (*Religion and Rural Society: South Lindsey, 1825-1875*, Oxford 1976) provides ample evidence for the social distance, and consequent reduced pastoral effectiveness, of rural clergy. This observation is not new. Horace Mann, in his commentary on the 1851 religious census, argued that hostility towards ministers might be decreased 'if those who introduced the message of Christianity were less removed in station and pursuits from those it is sought to influence' (*Census of Great Britain, 1851, Religious Worship,* London 1853, p clx). That deservedly respected UMCA missionary, Bishop Edward Steere, urged the need for 'native clergy', not only in Africa but also in England. 'I hope to see the day', he wrote in 1857, 'when a very large proportion of the Clergy of England have not cost several thousands of pounds to educate, and have no special rank as gentlemen' (R. M. Heanley, *A Memoir of Edward Steere*, London 1888, p 381). That day has yet to come. The composition of the higher clergy has changed little in social and educational terms over the last hundred years and, whatever difference there is lower down the scale, is largely obscured by the socialization of the peer group.

Our model of the ordained minister requires that he must be, in principle, capable of working anywhere, and it follows that quite high intellectual (and social) standards are required. When a working

party a few years ago examined various proposals aimed at producing a more local and indigenous leadership, it was worried by—amongst other things—lowering the educational standards, and thus the status, of the ministry (ACCM, *The Place of Auxiliary Ministry, Ordained and Lay*, London 1973, p 25). It seemed to be a thinly veiled defence of *élitism*. The present model admirably suits the needs of one social class and should not therefore be abandoned, but it should not be the only model controlling our policy. The experience of the church in other parts of the world, of organizations such as trade unions which uncover local leadership of high skill, and of the apostolic church, provide much food for thought.

The ordination of women

Any decision of the General Synod about this issue would have caused deep pain to many. Pain demands sympathy and understanding. The obstruction of deeply felt aspirations was hurtful, particularly because a fundamentally significant truth—intellectually reasoned, spiritually comprehended and regarded as pastorally necessary—appeared to be denied. It is for this reason that, whatever views are held about their ministry, women are given the greatest possible opportunity to exercise a full ministry within the constraints of these views and of present legal limitations. If the church has benefited from the talents of many women, it has also failed to utilize a reservoir of latent potential. There needs to be some reverse discrimination. To recall Florence Nightingale's famous heart-cry, as she outlined her felt rejection by the Church of England, is salutary:

> I would have given her my head, my heart, my hand. She would not have them. She told me to go back and do crochet in my mother's drawing room; or, if I were tired of that, to marry and look well at the head of my husband's table. You may go to the Sunday School, if you like it, she said. But she gave me no training even for that. She gave me neither work to do for her, nor education for it. [E. Cook, *The Life of Florence Nightingale*, 2 vols., London 1913, Vol.1, p57]

Though the opportunities of service now exist on an altogether different scale, the fact remains that women, without always necessarily desiring ordination, still feel that their talents are not fully appreciated and used.

At the same time, the decision of the Synod is but another example of the conservatism which the plurality of views and positions within the Church of England inevitably brings. If there is any virtue in comprehensiveness; if there is any peace through toleration, respect and love; then change must proceed slowly. It is not unfair to expect that those who seek the most radical change have also to demonstrate great patience. By the same token, it is not unfair to expect that those who have gained the immediate 'victory' show great understanding.

The Reith Lectures

Dr Edward Norman's Reith Lectures have caused many words to be

written and they will undoubtedly be a catalyst to many more, some of them in forthcoming issues of this journal. For that reason alone we are in Dr Norman's debt, for the concerns he raises are of central importance. Leaving these aside for further discussion, the reaction which Dr Norman has roused is intriguing. The church establishment has given the impression, largely by hints and allusions, that it disapproves his thesis. The general public (the laity), by its enormous interest and by its circumspect treatment of Dr Norman, has demonstrated more than a little approval. This can be interpreted as a hunger for a more spiritual version of the Christian message, or as a desire to be reassured that Christianity does not demand awkward and uncomfortable political and cultural decisions. Evangelicals who, because of their reputation for political conservatism and naivety, and because of their temperamental affinity with any views which attack a 'liberal' interpretation of Christianity, might have been expected to give whole-hearted support to his thesis, have not done so. It is a further mark of the changes which are taking place within our constituency.

The identity problem

Jim Packer's latest study (*The Evangelical Anglican Identity Problem: An Analysis*, Latimer House: Oxford 1978) demands attention, not only because it is written with his customary clarity, perspicaciousness and force, but also because it is tinged with a pessimism which may prove to be prophetic and which it would be foolish to dismiss without further consideration. The monograph has led to an ongoing debate, in the course of which 'the identity problem' has become 'the identity crisis'. The book is reviewed elsewhere but, because the controversy has gone beyond the book, further comment seems to be in order.

An identity problem can be caused, at a corporate level, either because there are competing forces vieing for loyalty and power, or because there seems to be no identifiable *raison d'être* to bind together. The former can be lived with: the latter spells death. It is arguable that evangelicalism has a problem of the former, rather than the latter category. A *raison d'être* crisis would be most likely to express itself in differences over fundamental doctrine. The definition of fundamental doctrine may of course be part of the problem but, taking the fundamentals as defined by Packer—the supremacy of Scripture, the majesty of Jesus Christ, the lordship of the Holy Spirit, the necessity of conversion, the priority of evangelism and the importance of fellowship (pp 20-3)—there seem to be a few signs that any representative body of evangelicals would have problems in assenting to them.

It remains true, nonetheless, that evangelicals have an identity problem caused by the variety of interpretation and practice possible

within a basic adherence to the fundamentals—but this has been endemic in our history. Differences about the definition of *adiaphora* and, behind these, differences about the scope of Scripture and the place of reason and tradition, divided Cranmer and Hooper and were a foretaste of prolonged conflict over matters of liturgy and church order. The desire for a close fellowship of the elect, with a minimal involvement in the affairs of the state and the world, divided the Anabaptists and the pietists from both the successors of Cranmer and Hooper. The consequence has been diversity of emphasis. So, in the nineteenth century, Shaftesbury had a deep sense of isolation from most of the evangelical constituency because of his social concerns, and so Ryle became a trenchant critic of Keswick and the holiness movement.

If then Anglican evangelicalism has always had disparate and sometimes warring traditions—coming together closely only in the face of an external threat or, occasionally, for common evangelistic outreach—why is there the feeling that our present identity problem is so different? Perhaps the most obvious reason is that we are still emerging from a period of prolonged defensiveness in which evangelicalism was, of necessity, atypically monochrome. In contrast, the present seems to be dangerously pluralistic: but it is scarcely so if viewed against evangelicalism over a broader sweep.

Thus the movement of the last few years has brought emphases which, though they contrast somewhat with our immediate past, remain in keeping with our extended history. Firstly, there has been a recognition that our own traditions are more varied and capable of less uniform interpretation than was granted in the defensive period. Secondly, there has been the realization that other traditions, within and beyond Anglicanism, have important insights to offer. Thirdly, there has been a return to that part of our tradition which is world-accepting and therefore concerned to express itself in political, cultural and ethical convictions. Of course this process has been in motion for perhaps twenty years, but it is only now reaching a stage where individuals and sub-groups within Anglican evangelicalism are spelling out the implications of the freer thinking they have known and the new experiences they have shared. Keele pointed the way. Nottingham indicated that the path would not necessarily bring uniformity of view. An identity problem will remain as differing groups strive to express themselves, and perhaps to bid for ascendancy. It will become a crisis only if they cease to respect each other, or if they significantly depart from the evangelical fundamentals.

PETER WILLIAMS