

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

Editorial

Evangelicals and ecclesiology

The evangelical identity debate showed occasional signs in its early stages of being a fractious internal squabble, with some elements demanding uniformity where previously there had been tolerance of variety. If that pathway had been followed, evangelical Anglicanism might today, in terms of disunity and schism, bear a very close resemblance to the Labour Party. Fortunately the danger appears to have been averted, and the evidence of the recent 'Consultation of Anglican Evangelicals' is of an encouraging exploration of significant issues at depth, conducted, judging from reports, with serious tolerance and without a desire for confrontation and exclusion. If such positive benefits continue to accrue from this navel-gazing, then the exercise will certainly have been worthwhile.

Tom Wright's recent monograph brings the debate into an area of crucial importance (N.T. Wright, *Evangelical Anglican Identity: The Connection between Bible, Gospel and Church*, Latimer House, Oxford 1980). Traditionally, ecclesiology has not been an evangelical strength. Frequently, because of its strong emphasis on the invisible church, it has looked to spiritual fellowship with other 'believers' as the proper expression of Christian unity; it has not concerned itself very greatly with the historic and visible church; and it has, in matters of practical policy within, and relationships to, the wider church, been rather insular, while justifying its refusal to take a sectarian pathway on pragmatic grounds. It has combined a very high doctrine of the invisible church with a somewhat fuzzy empiricism about the implications of its visibility. One has only to read a little of Newman's early problems with evangelicalism to see how he, and many others, found this to be a cause of major dissatisfaction. Practically, of course, evangelical Anglicans have been increasingly committed for some time to the realities of full participation in the church, but the justification for this has been more pragmatic than theological. Wright analyses with great clarity the standard models evangelicals use to understand their relationship with wider Anglicanism. He finds them all less than satisfying. Indeed, as evangelical Christology has often been weak 'in exploring the significance of Jesus' humanity', so much of its ecclesiology 'has failed to take seriously the nature of the church as the historical and visible people of God' (ibid. p.20). Failure to get this right has meant a measure of distortion of the gospel itself, because the gospel can only be properly understood 'in the context of the church', and, consequently, 'if the gospel is wrenched out of the context of the people of God, it will not

resonate with all its true overtones' (ibid., p.22). With these weaknesses in mind, Wright's vision is of a 'Catholic Protestantism' in which both traditional Catholicism and traditional Protestantism pool 'the biblical insights of each side' (ibid., p.23) and, in rethinking their attitudes, 'bring them more into line with the Bible and the Gospel' (ibid., p.24).

Wright's monograph is the more interesting because he attempts to grapple with some of the issues which must be raised in any such dialogue. His rejection of the popular evangelical polarization of Bible and church has implications for the understanding of tradition. If the church is important, so too are its traditions. In any event, the Bible must be understood within a tradition and it is crucial that this tradition be that of the 'covenant community' (ibid., p.26), linked to the past and seeking to interpret the guidance of the Spirit in the present. Otherwise the Bible is not properly apprehended. 'On what ground of reason or Scripture', asked John Henry Newman in 1835 of his brother Frank, then emerging from his Brethren phase, 'do you say that everyone may gain the true doctrines of the gospel for himself from the Bible? Where is illumination promised the *individual* for the purpose?' (quoted in William Robbins, *The Newman Brothers: An Essay in Comparative Intellectual Biography*, Heinemann, London 1966, p.59). Wright's strong emphasis on the Bible in the context of the church (which is itself under the Word) was not, sadly, a characteristic of nineteenth-century evangelicalism. He would have had some sympathy with Newman's problems, for he is clear that the Bible cannot be fully understood at a purely individual level: 'Only if we are living in the context of the covenant community—only if we are sharing in the sacraments, in the historical life of the people of God—can the Bible really be *our* book' (Wright, op. cit., p.27).

Within this church the sacraments are crucial, and Wright condemns any merely symbolic interpretation and any practice which fails to give them a central place in the life of the worshipping community. Then, in a most helpful section on the ministry, he argues trenchantly against the sort of anti-clericalism which some evangelicals display in their enthusiasm to emphasize the equality of believers and a functional view of the ministry. For him the ministry is not 'merely functional', but an office which comes out of God's call which has been confirmed by the church. To pursue a policy, therefore, which thinks only in terms of function and which would remove distinctions, is to obscure the ontological character of the ministry and to risk producing a man-centred rather than a God-ordained ministry.

Many features of such an ecclesiology, with its strong sense of the importance of the visible church, sacraments and the ordained ministry, are more typical of traditional Anglicanism than of contemporary evangelicalism. Wright is aware of this, and argues that evangelicals

should take on board 'far more actual Anglican theology' (ibid., p.35) than they usually do. He contends that, as they do so, their theology will come to bear a much closer resemblance to that of 'the great mainline reformers' (ibid., p.33). It is an attractive and stimulating argument, because it draws attention to an area of profound evangelical weakness—ecclesiology—and because the process of exploration and rediscovery which its acceptance would imply, might well itself aid the solution of an Anglican as well as an evangelical identity problem.

Recognition and incorporation of ministries

This editorial is written before the crucial decision in Synod on the Covenant Proposals, but in anticipation that the issue will not be entirely foreclosed. As the debate becomes more vigorous, it is increasingly clear that the fundamental argument for the rejection of the proposals is dissatisfaction with the means of recognition and incorporation. In their latest consideration, the signatories of the Memorandum of Dissent significantly alter the balance of their original case (Graham Leonard *et. al.*, *The Covenant: A Re-Assessment*, Dolphin Papers 12, London 1981). Recognition and incorporation have become central to their case in a way which makes the debate over women ministers and non-episcopally ordained URC moderators somewhat otiose.

Recognition, as it was defined at the High Leigh Conference on ministry, involved recognizing the churches 'as they now are' but doing so only 'in the light of what all the churches would become' (General Synod, Board for Mission and Unity [BMU], *Evidence on Ecumenism*, GS Misc 76, CIO, London 1978, p.18). The York Resolutions, which laid down the terms of reference for the Church of England involvement in the Churches Council on Covenanting [CCC], spoke of recognition of ministers being 'effected by the action of the whole episcopate of all the covenanting Churches incorporating the existing ministers into the historic threefold ministry...' (General Synod, BMU, *Ten Propositions for Visible Unity: The Response of the Church of England*, GS 373, CIO, London 1978, para. 31, 4b; cf. *Report of Proceedings*, 9, July 1978, pp.595-6). The Covenanting Proposals do not precisely follow this pattern, in that recognition and acceptance precedes incorporation; though, as the BMU assessment argues, these should be understood proleptically because they are 'given in the context of intention and commitment which are in the process of fulfilment' (General Synod, BMU, *The Covenant: An Assessment*, GS 473, CIO, London 1980, para. 63).

Leonard, Boulton and Clark cannot accept this order, at any rate in a context where not all exercising episcopal ministry will have been episcopally ordained, because they take this to be an affirmation by

the URC that 'prior to covenanting . . . ministries were all sufficient' (CCC, *Towards Visible Unity: Proposals for a Covenant*, London 1980, p.89). Furthermore, they have problems both with the question and the prayer at the point of the blessing of the presbyterial ministries, because neither sufficiently emphasizes that recognition and incorporation bring 'a fulness and universality which the existing ministries lacked in separation' (Leonard, op. cit., p.6). Finally, they are concerned about the assumption that incorporation will be representative, and thus any ministers who are not involved in the covenanting services will be regarded as incorporated because of the action of the representatives of their church.

These objections have a logical coherence, but their weight must be set against the general acclaim with which the proposals have been received by other sections of Anglicanism and by the other churches involved; against the fact that the dissentients did not choose to underline them in quite this way in their original memorandum; and, most importantly, against the instinctive feeling of many that they are more an exercise in logic-chopping than in theological profundity. Those who regard these objections as sufficient to reject the present Covenant, and therefore to make the probability of any Covenant very unlikely, must face certain questions. Do they take with the utmost seriousness the widely acknowledged academic consensus that neither Scripture nor the earliest traditions speak of any one form of ministry? If the Spirit allowed a variety of order and practice then, why cannot he, to repeat a question asked by the Bishop of Winchester, work now through 'a temporary variety', particularly as there is no doubt 'as to the outcome and the *terminus ad quem*'? (General Synod, *Report of Proceedings*, 11, July 1980, p.694). Are they aware of how, within Anglican history, even those who might be thought to be forerunners of their traditions have been more generous in their recognition of other ministries? So, in 1610, when three Scottish ministers came to London to be consecrated as bishops, questions were raised because they had not been episcopally ordained. The matter was settled by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Bancroft, who declared that episcopal ordination was unnecessary, 'seeing where bishops could not be had, the ordination given by the presbyters must be esteemed lawful; otherwise it might be doubted if there was any lawful vocation in most of the Reformed churches' (N. Sykes, *Old Priest and New Presbyter*, CUP, Cambridge 1956, p.101). When these bishops returned to Scotland they did not attempt to re-ordain presbyters (*ibid.*, p.102).

Do the dissentients fully realize the very great concessions to their traditions which the other churches, particularly the URC, are making by accepting the Covenant? Have they not implied in the Memorandum of Dissent that the proposed forms of recognition and incorpora-

tion might be sufficient if they were not associated with the continuation of a non-episcopally ordained episcopal ministry? Should they not therefore be working for a solution to that problem, rather than raising objections which would hold even if the URC moderators were all to be consecrated as bishops? Does not the redrawing of their positions, which their latest work indicates, suggest a hardening of attitudes which itself suggests a certain lack of, or decline in, enthusiasm for the whole exercise of Covenanting?

The debate must go on within the Church of England. The problem with such debates arises because of the truth of Erasmus's observation that 'man suffers from this almost congenital disease that he will not give in when once a controversy is started, and after he is warmed up he regards as absolutely true that which he began to sponsor quite casually...' (quoted in R. H. Bainton, *Erasmus of Christendom*, Collins Fontana, London 1972, pp.224-5). There are signs of this process, and it would be a tragedy if the Covenant were to be wrecked by a concentration on building ever higher defences; rather it should be saved by discovering means to speed their demolition.

PETER WILLIAMS