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The Crisis Facing the Church of England¹

DONALD MACLEOD

I am taking a grave risk, as all of you will know, because I have come into this foreign country and I am now going to criticize one of your beloved institutions. But I am doing so, if I may say so, on your own instigation and by your own invitation. I want to explore the Crisis Facing the Church of England, and to do so under four separate headings.

The Theological Crisis

There is first of all, what I may call, *a theological crisis*, and that of some magnitude. It has come about because, for the last one hundred and fifty years, there have been two great forces playing upon the Church of England: one, which I may broadly call the forces of modernism, and the other the forces of Anglo-Catholicism. Both of these have been able to amass enormous talent and political skill in their attempts to change the character of Anglicanism in the last couple of centuries. The result is that we face at the moment a major theological crisis. Its elements, in my view, are as follows:

There has been *a departure from the old norm of sola scriptura*, that is of the Bible, and the Bible alone, as the source of our Christian doctrine. Now I think we owe the erosion of this Christian principle primarily to the Anglo-Catholic forces. They have persuaded the Church to the view that we obtain our doctrine, not from the Bible alone, but from the Bible plus the ancient Creeds plus the Fathers. In other words we have moved fairly unconsciously into a classic Roman-Catholic position. That means that today, substantially, men feel bound to base their formulations not upon God's Word alone but upon God's Word plus these other alleged sources. In many ways it has suited the Liberal-Modernist wing to go along with this because the immediate result is that your theological source lacks homogeneity. If you move from the Bible to the Bible plus the Creeds plus the Fathers you lose the old unity of your rule of faith. In the Bible, as God's Word, there is a coherent, unified self-disclosure despite modern claims to the contrary. But if you bring into the arena not only God's Word, but also the stand-points and opinions of the Fathers and the Creeds then you bring in diversity. That confusion is easily exploited by modernist theology. They will point out the lack of agreement or consensus in your theological sources. They will use that for your confusion. They will ask, for example, 'Which Christology? Which

view of man are we to accept?' We haven't', they say, 'one view, but several.' Now this is the root cause of many of our problems—the loss of the exclusive Biblical orientation. The Bible itself is seen as one witness—among others—to revelation. It is placed on the same practical and functional level as the ancient creeds and the views of the Fathers.

The second element in this theological crisis is *the relegation of the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England*. Now this caused me some astonishment, but it seems very obvious that in the Bishops' Report, *The Nature of Christian Belief*, and in A.R.C.I.C. as well, it is clearly postulated that we must distinguish, within the Church of England, between the status and function of the ancient creeds and the status of the Articles. For example, the Lambeth Quadrilateral takes as the basis of ecumenism the Bible, the Creeds, the threefold ministry and the sacraments. It says nothing of the Articles. And it is made plain time and again that, whilst there is substantial commitment to the basic thrust of the Creeds, individuals have much more latitude in approaching the Articles. In practice, every man takes them in his own sense. Having said that, there is a great deal of dishonesty as well because it is supposed to be the case that we at least adopt the system and basic thrust of the Articles as part of our Anglican position. And yet, if there is one thing true of the Articles, it is the anti-Romanist edge by which they are marked. They were surely drafted to create a Protestant Church. Yet the attempt is so often made to interpret the Articles themselves in a Romish sense.

Now it seems to me that if you are going to have this dichotomy, the Creeds being in some sense binding but the Articles discretionary, then you are really abandoning your whole Protestant position. It is in the Articles that the Church's Reformed ideology and theology are defined. It is in the Articles, for example, not the Creeds, that we have our statements on justification. The net effect of this relegation of the Articles is to make your distinctive Protestant theology an entirely open question. The creeds commit us in theory to the ancient Christology of the Church and that is about all. It is in the Articles that we have Evangelicalism defined. At the moment that is structurally compromised in the Church of England.

The third element in our theological crisis is *the denial of fundamental doctrines by the Church's representative theologians*. My emphasis here falls on the word fundamental. I have myself a fairly long list of prejudices, some of them theological. I am not saying your theologians deny my prejudices. I am saying that they appear to deny fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith. By fundamental I mean those doctrines that belong to the core, without which there is no Gospel and no Christianity. I mean such things as the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the deity of Christ and the whole complex of trinitarian doctrines, not to mention such things as vicarious atonement.

One could become more searching still and ask whether in the work of a man like Don Cupitt basic Christian theism is up for grabs. It is at that level that I am operating, at the level of those things that are not the prerogative of any one denomination, nor any trend in the church, but which constitute bedrock Christianity. I have in mind the doctrines of the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds and of the Council of Chalcedon. Now if we are asked, 'Who denies these things?' I reply that I'm thinking of men like the late John Robinson, G.K.W. Lampe, Don Cupitt and David Jenkins. These are representative theologians. They are the people to whom the Church of England entrusts the training of its clergy. And I am saying that in the work of these men you find explicit deviation from the Christology of the Ancient creeds. You will find in John Robinson a fairly explicit Adoptionism which teaches, not that Christ was God, but that Christ in some sense became God. You will find the same general teaching in Lampe, that it is by the Spirit's dynamic action that Jesus becomes in some sense God. You will find in Don Cupitt the denial of the whole Christian world view of the supernatural. You will find John Robinson, asking reductionist questions about the whole theistic structure of reality; about the God who is there. You will find more recently men like David Jenkins who challenge the fundamental concepts of the Apostles' Creed.

Now this is not a denial of Evangelical, Protestant or Calvinist distinctives. It is a denial of what are by any standards Christian fundamentals. It is probably the single most alarming aspect of our current situation. It is by no means confined to the Church of England. It is equally true of many of the other denominations within the Christian spectrum but it is still, for you, an in-house problem.

The fourth element in this crisis is *the tendency to confuse reductionism with theological creativity*. In the Bishops' Report, *The Nature of Christian Belief*, there is great emphasis laid on the integrity and heroism of those men who question in faith. There is a clear impression conveyed that David Jenkins belongs to this honourable succession of men who are questioning in faith. Now I believe it is enormously important to question and to question in faith. I believe in the on-going need for theological creativity, for work on the frontiers of theology in the most productive way possible, for new questions to be asked, and for old assumptions to be challenged. But there is a momentous distinction between challenging *in* faith and challenging *the* faith. That is the point we have reached at the present time. People who occupy privileged positions in the denominations are not simply questioning *in* faith. They are questioning *the* faith itself. Indeed some of these people give clear evidence of taking positive delight in unsettling the cherished convictions of the people of God. That is quite irresponsible. What we have, as far as I can determine, is not creative theological advance

but the repromulgation of ancient heresy masquerading as theological creativity.

It is very significant that in the work of men like John Robinson and David Jenkins we end up, not with twenty-second century theology, but with second century theology and the ancient heresies—and these masquerading as creativity. It is actually very, very difficult to be a theological original. It has almost all been said before. It is very difficult even to ask new questions. It needs genius to ask new questions at the current level of theological development.

Fifthly, we have *the episcopal endorsement of these theological trends*. I am raising the point because there is something very curious going on in Anglicanism. It happened in the Church of Rome long ago. A distinction came to be drawn between the magisterium, that is the teaching church, and the theologians. In Roman Catholicism the theologians do not belong to the teaching church. They lie outside it. The teaching church is the episcopate. The theologians are not part of that. For example men like Hans Küng, Karl Rahner and Yves Congar were not deemed to be part of the teaching church. They were theologians, doctors, outside the magisterium.

It is assumed in Romanism that the actual teaching authority belongs to the episcopate. Now I think that is probably happening in Anglicanism as well, which is in itself an interesting phenomenon. We are drawing a distinction between our Oxbridge theologians and the teaching church. We are assuming that it is the episcopate in fact that really is the source of magisterium or teaching within the Church of England. It is because of this development that I want to mention this detail that the new trends have been given episcopal endorsement.

It could be said that Don Cupitt is doing in his own academic environment a fairly clinical and sanitized job where he cannot do very much harm. The same could be said of John Robinson, when he went back to academic life. It could be said, too, that G.K.W. Lampe was one of those men who functioned in academic cloisters. Their specific rôle was to work on the frontiers. But the whole trend has come home into the episcopate itself in the work of, for example, David Jenkins, who is on the bench of Bishops. Along with that the whole trend has been endorsed by the Bishops' Report, *The Nature of Christian Belief*, where the episcopate has sanctioned the trends I have been mentioning. Now if the rôle of the episcopate is to assert, maintain and defend the faith it really is a cause for serious alarm that the Bishops themselves are involved in creating a serious theological crisis.

The Ecclesiological Crisis

The second crisis is the *Ecclesiological Crisis*, that is, the crisis of church order and church polity. Again I want to mention and share with you a few of my particular concerns under this heading.

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One of those concerns is what I can only call, *the emergence of denominationalism*. I mean by this that the Church of England is a fragmented body. It is already a compartmentalized body. There are groups within it who have in fact little contact with each other and who have little in common. They pursue no common purpose and coexist within the one grouping only by dint of agreed mutual toleration, or maybe indifference. I do not want to go into this in too much detail but we have the Liberal group, the Anglo-Catholic group and the Evangelical group. They are very similar in many ways to the various orders of Roman Catholicism, such as Dominicans and Augustinians, who have their own clear lines of demarcation. This raises the question of, 'What is the meaning of unity and fellowship within such a body?' There is no doubt that many Evangelicals have far more in common with, and far more contact with, non-Anglican Evangelicals than they do with Anglican non-Evangelicals. There is already a barrier and fragmentation between those various groups.

The second point I would mention is *sacerdotalism*. I mean by this simply the dominance of a priestly mentality in the Anglican establishment. This is reflected in the use of the word priest for the clergy, although this is not all that simple etymologically. I am more concerned here with the way Anglicanism has moved from the Reformation idea that the preaching of the Word was the primary function and mark of the Church to the Romish, priestly idea that the sacraments, conceived as sacrifices, are the primary function of the Church.

It is very, very clear in A.R.C.I.C. I that this is how the Church is seen. It is clear that the sacrament of the Mass is seen as the central activity of the Christian Church. The ministry is seen primarily, not as a preaching ministry but as a sacramental, sacrificing ministry. Indeed the whole discussion which will emerge soon with regard to the ordination of women will focus on the same issue. The question will be, 'Are women competent, not to preach the Gospel but, to offer the sacrifice of the eucharist?' We have lost our bearings. We are no longer thinking of the Word as primary. We are thinking of the eucharist as central and of the ministry as eucharistic ministry.

This is probably the single gravest difficulty that faces the modern reformation of the Church of England. It has been with us for so long. Bishop Ryle concedes that since 1662 Evangelicals have been a minority within the Church of England. That is a fairly staggering concession to make, whether or not it is justified. He is really conceding that the group for whom the Word was primary has been a minority for three centuries. I am putting it to you to work this one out. Christianity is in its very nature anti-sacerdotal. The moment you redefine the Church in terms of offering sacrifices and in terms of priesthood then you have lost your New Testament orientation and your Protestant character.

The third element in the ecclesiological crisis is *the separation from Evangelical brethren*. What I am asking you to face is that your loyalty to the Church of England has cost you dear. You have made that choice deliberately, and I can admire its heroism, but it has meant that you are ostracized by many who share your primary convictions. That is a difficult cross to bear. I do not sympathize with those English Free Churchmen who have been responsible for instigating this attitude towards Anglican Evangelicals, but it is a fact of life. It is also a fact of life that there are serious impediments to fellowship. I mean especially that you are forbidden by Canon Law to offer your pulpits freely to non-Anglicans. There are restrictions upon fellowship at that particular level. It is ironic that there is perfect freedom to allow the most Romish practices within the articulated Church of England but there is no room to allow non-ordained, in Canon Law terms, Free Church clergymen into your services. That is hedged up with all kinds of Canon Law details.

My fourth point is this. *Evangelicals are only sub-tenants within the Church of England* and have been so for a long time now. In other words we are back to Ryle's point. The tenancy is held by Anglo-Catholics and Liberals. They own it and they run it. You are a minority with little or no say in the administration or in the policy-making of this particular body. To some extent that is your own fault. It is your own decision. You have chosen very often not to be involved in the structures and politics of the Church of England, partly because you have been very 'spiritual'. You do not believe in such things as denominational politics. The result is that you are in fact sub-tenants. This is something which we must think through.

Fundamentalism is tolerated on the fringe. It has made no bid to be at the centre. It certainly is not at the centre at the moment. For example, on the bench of Bishops, is there one committed Evangelical? In the structures of this church, its administration and bureaucracy, is there any Evangelical input? Are you content to be a tolerated and accepted minority, sub-tenants, within this large body?

This bothers me on a much wider scale than simply within Anglicanism. It bothers me because it appears that fundamentalism is non-institutionalized. It has decided that it can function without institutions. Marxism has its institutions, so has Romanism, and so has Liberalism. But Evangelicals have adopted the hyper-spiritual point of view that we do not need to own property and that we can be sub-tenants. I am not sure that we are facing the challenge that we are being parasitical. It can be said, of course, that the Articles are on our side. But what is their status? Are we practically anything but sub-tenants? And is it really wise of us to imagine that we can exist without institutions, and that we do not need machinery, bureaucracy, to put our own point of view across? I think that that contradicts the nature of our humanness. It runs counter to the fundamental message

of the Incarnation that we have to en flesh the grace and truth of God. Fundamentalism needs body. Evangelicalism needs body. It cannot function as pure spirit. It needs concrete visible manifestation. It needs resources, buildings and bureaucracy for the sake of its own survival and for its own extension. But we have chosen to be sub-tenants.

I raise one more point under this heading. It is this, *the patent impossibility of exercising discipline within the Church of England*. This is obviously not confined to the Church of England by any means but it may be seen in its most extreme form within it. The Roman Catholic Church, to its credit, still has a formidable disciplinary apparatus. When a man like Hans Küng began to make noises suggesting he was in the same vogue as the Bishop of Woolwich and Don Cupitt, then his teaching licence was withdrawn. Discipline was exercised. I imagine that any Catholic Bishop who began to make Jenkins-like noises would be dealt with, maybe not as publicly as Küng, but certainly very effectively. He would be muzzled.

There is a real question as to whether we have not only the apparatus, but the will to deal with that kind of problem. Now it is indeed to be borne in mind that there is nothing worse for a Church than botched discipline. It is imperative that we remind ourselves that unless discipline can be done cleanly then it had better not be done at all. Furthermore, it had better not be done frequently. But there are instances where it is patently called for. I am asking whether there is provision within the system as it is now for discipline, and especially to discipline those who are themselves Bishops. The Bishops have, I assume, power to exercise discipline over the clergy. But who disciplines the Bishops? When they become the problem, who deals with them?

The Ecumenical Crisis

Thirdly, there is *an ecumenical crisis*. This is what I use as a flag for the crisis precipitated by the A.R.C.I.C. proposals. In many ways these proposals have thrown a time-bomb into the life of the Church of England. They have changed the parameters. They have precipitated this crisis. There are two points to explore here.

One is that *the fundamentals are being redefined in a way that I find nothing short of astonishing*. One is often given the impression in modern theology that there are no such things as fundamentals and that the whole concept is taboo. 'You can't have,' we are told, 'that which is non-negotiable. Everything is fluid and flexible. Fundamentalism is for Moslems and sectarian Presbyterians but not for respectable Anglicans. There must not be any fundamentals.' Yet if you look, not only at the small print but at the main thrust of A.R.C.I.C. and other similar documents, and the whole ecumenical framework, you find that certain things are deemed non-negotiable.

And if you ask, 'What?' then you find that the threefold ministry is deemed non-negotiable.

I have come to the conclusion that the one fundamental doctrine of the Church of England is the threefold ministry of presbyter, deacon and bishop. Considering that every source that one consults from within Anglicanism, ranging from J. B. Lightfoot to A.R.C.I.C. I, concedes that there was no monarchical episcopate in the New Testament and that it is a second century and very gradual development, I find it remarkable that something which is confessedly non-Biblical should have this marvellous status of being the one thing that we cannot on any account put up for negotiation. Earlier I referred to the barriers erected between Anglicans and other Evangelicals. That we should take the position that the office of a bishop is the one thing that we must insist on having in the future great world-church is an important barrier. It does not need to have the Gospel, but it must have bishops. That to me is something fairly astonishing.

The second, and in some ways more important point, is *the loss of the Protestant character of the Church of England*. If we agree to having a relationship with the Roman Catholic Church based on A.R.C.I.C. I and II there will be an immediate and unquestionable loss and eclipse of our Protestant character. Those documents indicate that the proposed reunion is based upon concession to Rome pure and simple. Let me be more detailed.

If we have union based on A.R.C.I.C. we are going to have, for one thing, sacramental realism. That is a lovely piece of jargon. Let me explain what I mean. Sacramental realism is shorthand for the idea of the real presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper. Put that way it sounds innocuous. It is because so much of this language sounds innocuous that it has had the success it has. But if we ask, 'what is meant by the real presence of Christ in the sacrament?' then we begin to find other nuances and emphases emerging. We discover that the word 'real' had a very definite and precise theological meaning, going back to the Latin word *res* for a thing. The real presence comes to mean the presence of *the thing itself*. The thing, we find, is the body of Christ. So we move from the presence of Christ in the sacrament, something which I don't deny, to the real presence of Christ, which I put a question mark over; to the presence of the thing, which I deny, to the presence of the body, a corporal and carnal presence, which I also deny. In the proposed liturgy, before consecration, when we ask of the bread, 'What is this?' we are told it is bread. But after the consecration, when we ask, 'What is this?' we are told it is the body of Christ. A.R.C.I.C., in a footnote, tries to explain away the idea of transubstantiation but if you have something becoming something else that is essentially transubstantiation. They may be able to explain away the old Aristotelian distinctions between accidents and substance,

and say 'We don't believe that any more', but they believe in a becoming. Sacramental realism will be an inevitable commitment of union based upon the A.R.C.I.C. proposals. It will elevate to dogma in the new Church of England this idea of the presence in the Lord's Supper of the physical body of Jesus Christ. It is such a difficult concept. It is very difficult to clarify, or even to prove that it is there. At one level you have got to ask, 'What body do they mean?' The one he used to have or the one he now has?' There are all kinds of difficulties. Most difficulties are fertile areas for confusion. But what really is happening is that the Roman dogma, with all its blurred edges, is being elevated to the status of non-negotiable and fundamental doctrine.

There will be also a significant tampering with our own commitment to justification by faith alone under A.R.C.I.C. II. A.R.C.I.C. II is a brilliant document. It is brilliant because it uses language in a quite masterly way to precipitate confusion. It takes a great deal of genius to create such confusion in such a small compass. It is simply a continuation of the tactics of the Tractarians, Newman and his associates, who in the nineteenth century took words from the Articles and the New Testament and attempted to show that their obvious meaning was not their necessary meaning. It is very, very difficult to pick holes in A.R.C.I.C. II. At one level the whole notion of faith has been re-interpreted so as to include works. One can say that justification is to be re-interpreted to become synonymous with salvation. If I am asked, 'Am I justified by faith alone?', I say, 'Yes.' But if I am asked, 'Am I saved by Faith alone?', I say, 'No.' A.R.C.I.C. II knows that. They exploit my weakness and so they define justification as salvation. They can do so partly because our source is no longer simply the Bible. Our source includes the Fathers. It can be shown very easily that some of the Fathers used the term justification in the sense of to make righteous. What A.R.C.I.C. is doing then is to create confusion and then exploit it.

An alliance based upon A.R.C.I.C. I and II will result in a Church which has conceded virtually everything to Catholicism. It will have undone the Reformation. It will have a Catholic view of the Lord's Supper, a Catholic concept of justification and, of course, it will also have a commitment to the primacy of the See of Rome. There again A.R.C.I.C. I and II have blurred the issues. What does it mean, this primacy of the See of Rome? Will they tell us, 'It does not mean that he will be seen as the Vicar of Christ with plenipotentiary teaching power? That he will not be the bishop of every province of the Anglican church? But that he will be the visible symbol of unity?' Well that's nonsense.

There are many Anglicans, those in fact behind this drive for the last one hundred and fifty years, for whom he is already the Vicar of Christ and for whom the great privilege in life is to kiss his hand.

There is no way that they are going to stop with the nebulous concept of the papacy as the visible symbol of unity. You will then become part of the general Roman Catholic ideology and the Pope will have the same status in the Anglican province of the Church of Rome as he already has in the South American province of the Church of Rome. But at the moment the proposals are couched in the language of diplomacy. That brings me to my last comment.

The Constitutional Crisis

The fourth crisis is *a constitutional crisis*. I say that simply because of the implications of the papal primacy. If the Church of England accepts, in whatever sense, the primacy of the See of Rome, then that is going to create very serious legal problems. It is going to jeopardize factors which are fundamental to our British constitution. It is going to jeopardize the Establishment of the Church of England. Is it going to be politically feasible to have the Establishment in this country of what is in essence the Church of Rome? Mrs. Thatcher could indeed carry whatever she wants through Parliament. But it would give very grave offence to the Protestant conscience in this country because it would be blatantly illegal. It would involve the dismantling of massive segments of law, the most basic acts in our constitution. It would also jeopardize the monarchy.

At the moment the Queen is the Head of the Church of England, and that to me is just about acceptable. If the Pope were to become the Head of the Church of England and the Queen were to remain within that Church and become, therefore, a subject of the papacy, it would cause the most ominous rumblings in many sections of the Protestant community. It does not seem that very much attention has been given to either of these problems.

The Church of England is making the curious assumption that it is in practice a Free Church. Now it ought to be, maybe, but it isn't! It has found its own way, through General Synod, of by-passing Parliamentary authority, with such things as the *Alternative Service Book*. It really is taking an enormous gamble if it thinks that *via* the Synod alone it can unite with Rome under the papal primacy. It is assuming that there are not enough people in this country alert enough to notice what is going on. That is not at all an unreasonable gamble because there may not be enough people to notice. But it is a gamble nonetheless. Certainly if the process continues much further I think that we in Scotland will begin to make very serious and very threatening noises. And for myself I would probably abandon the monarchy if these proposals were to be carried through.

So these in my view are the four elements of the Crisis facing the Church of England: there is a theological crisis; there is an ecclesiological crisis; an ecumenical crisis and, looming, a

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constitutional crisis. Safeguarding the Gospel today in the Church of England means that each of these crises must be recognized for what it is, challenged, defeated and laid to rest.

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NOTES

- 1 A paper read to the Church Society Day Conference in the North-East held in St. Stephen's Church, Elswick, Newcastle-upon-Tyne on 7 November, 1987.