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Editorial

Ecclesiology—the doctrine of the Church—is suddenly all the rage in Evangelical circles. Following on from the Archbishop of Canterbury's call to Evangelicals at last year's N.E.A.C.3 to develop their ecclesiology more fully, the organizations and groups charged with the task of implementing the rhetoric of conference addresses have been busy at work. This year, the Anglican Evangelical Assembly, in its annual meeting at Kimmel Hall in North Wales, made it the special topic for its discussion, and there were three very interesting papers presented. As one might expect, these covered the Biblical teaching, Church history and contemporary application, though there was regrettably little overlap between the papers, and discussion of the Biblical and historical papers was combined, to the detriment of the former. It might come as a surprise to outsiders, but Anglican ecclesiology has always been more concerned with tradition than with Scripture, and Evangelicals are no exception to this particular rule.

What was less of a surprise was the realization that almost all ecclesiology, from Ignatius of Antioch to the present day, has been more of an exercise in theory than a description of facts. Indeed, one might go farther, and say that it has very largely been fantasy, developed by its proponents with scarcely any regard for the real-life situation around them. In this respect, it could be claimed that Hooker and his followers were at least realistic in their assessment of the Church—they did not try, like the Puritans, to attain an impossible ideal, but compromised with the existing situation and justified it by saying that it was not *contrary* to Scripture. This left the door open for an ecclesiology based on tradition and practice, provided that it was not seriously out of line with Biblical teaching.

The Anglican solution, which its opponents have always branded as pragmatic, illogical and unworkable, has stood the test of time rather well, though it must be confessed that it did not succeed in uniting the very different tendencies which were alive and active in Elizabethan and early Stuart England. Today it appears that it will crack apart once more in the usual way—losing the idealists and purists (like Anglo-Catholics opposed to the ordination of women) in the name of compromise and comprehensiveness. Once again, the issue of what is meant by unity in communion will be fudged, as it has been most remarkably in the Eames Report.

On the other side, it must be said that idealistic ecclesiology is at least as unworkable as mainline Anglicanism, and far more open to the charge of hypocrisy. Who is more vocal than a traditional Anglo-Catholic, when it comes to upholding the Ignatian ideal of the ruling

bishop? But everyone knows that if the Anglo-Catholics had paid any attention to their bishops, there would not be such a party in the Church today! Then there are the Eastern Orthodox, who rejoice in an ecclesiology which transcends national barriers to embrace the whole of mankind, but who live in a church more riven by nationalism than any great Christian communion. Rome is not much better—the ‘universal Church’ is so busy finding separated brethren and anonymous Christians that one wonders why being in communion with the Holy See has any relevance at all! And how many of us know that Anglicans are welcome to communicate at Mass *on the Continent* but not in the British Isles? So much for a body which claims to be *semper eadem*—the same everywhere and always.

Nonconformists, of course, are committed to some idea of a ‘pure’ Church, if only because by definition they are a gathering of the elect, not the religious expression of a nation. But nonconformists either exercise no discipline at all, being if anything slightly more lax in this respect than the Church of England, or else they subdivide into sects of such extreme ‘purity’ that the average outsider has no idea what its members are talking about! Set alongside these, the unrealities of Anglican Evangelicalism look more acceptable, and less of an affront to the witness of the Gospel.

But what makes Anglican Evangelicals distinct from others who wear that label? Is there anything about Anglicanism of which Evangelicals can boast to their Free Church brethren? Here the current wisdom is that episcopacy provides the answer. Bishops are high-profile representatives of the Church—to them belongs the great task of evangelism in the media age! It is interesting to speculate how many Anglican Evangelicals would be prepared to see the Bishop of Durham take Billy Graham’s place in Wembley Stadium, but even if we discount such a possibility, the suggestion that the Bishops are our main evangelists, and that because of them we possess an advantage over the Free Churches, must surely be viewed with some alarm. Bishops have not, in general, been known for their Gospel preaching, and their prominence in the media has usually been far more of an embarrassment to the Church than a help. This is not to say that there are not some very worthy men on the episcopal bench, but it is a peculiar form of blindness to suppose that they are somehow God’s answer to nonconformity.

At the end of the day, a real ecclesiology can only be rooted in the hearts and minds of believers. Evangelicals know that they are united to their brothers and sisters in Christ in a way which may not be at all apparent in the Church, and they also know that they are tied to goats and tares within the visible structures of the formal organizations to which they belong. Spirituality can never be reduced to a handy formula—it is the error of the Pharisees all over again! If Evangelicals are to make any real impact on the Church at large, they

must join hands with all those who think the way they do—whether they are Roman Catholic (Pope John XXIII?), Orthodox (Vladimir Solovyov?) or Protestant (Count von Zinzendorf?). Differences may not be resolved in this life, but spiritual unity is a reality which testifies to the presence of the Kingdom of God here and now. Fortunately, there is no human authority which can legislate on that either way. Is it not time that we Evangelicals returned to our spiritual roots and offered them to the Church as the true understanding of itself?

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