

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

The decennial Lambeth Conference has come and gone and a memorable occasion it proved to be too. For many years now, Anglicanism has been growing darker in colour and warmer in feel, as churches in the so-called 'Third World' have mushroomed and traditional mainline denominations in the whiter (and colder) West have declined. It has taken a long time for the consequences of this to be felt in the higher echelons of the church, because the legacies of missionary work on the one hand, and centuries-old tradition on the other, take a long time to adjust to the new realities. But Lambeth 1998 may have seen the Anglican Communion turn the corner at last, as bishops from Africa, Asia and Latin America made the running for the first time.

Those who plan such conferences could see that something of the kind was coming, and they had their own answer to it. In the planners' minds, Lambeth would be devoted to a discussion of how to reschedule the burden of international debt, a subject which to them must have seemed ideal. It could arouse moral indignation among Western liberals and attract support from those bishops whose local economies are so poor that they could hardly afford the trip to London. Nobody could object to such a worthy cause, and with a certain obligation on the part of the British government to be nice to those in communion with one of its established churches, there was just a chance that somebody in a position of influence might listen to them and even take what they had to say seriously.

International debt was indeed discussed at the Conference, and those who read the official summaries of what transpired might well have gone away thinking that it dominated the entire event. Others however know differently. For, whatever the planners might have desired, Lambeth 1998 was always going to be a showdown between those who believe in traditional faith and morals and those who do not. The former are overwhelmingly dominant in the Third World, so much so that it is hard to think of any bishop from those quarters who would not be a strong traditionalist, at least in moral terms. Those of a different mind come almost exclusively from the white West, with the (white) Bishop of Johannesburg neatly straddling the two with his reminder that 'there is homosexuality in Africa too'. By far the most notorious among these liberals is the Bishop of Newark (New Jersey), the Rt Rev John Shelby Spong, who went on record shortly before the Conference began to the effect that the African bishops (and presumably anyone else who disagreed with him) had only recently come down from the trees and were therefore incapable of deciding important moral issues like the rights of practising homosexuals.

He was joined, albeit in a slightly more polite vein, by the Bishop of Edinburgh, the Rt Rev Richard Holloway, who was so depressed by what he saw at Lambeth that he left the Labour Party in order to campaign for gay rights within the church. Who such people actually represent is unclear but it is worth noting that both of these men, and many others like them, were elected to their present office, and so must enjoy a degree of support which English bishops are not necessarily able to claim. Of course not all Scottish or American Episcopalians share the views of these particular spiritual leaders, but how is it that such people are able to get through the electoral process in the first place?

Clearly they must be shrewd political operators, and this gives them an advantage over the Africans and others like them, who probably attained high office because of their recognized spiritual and intellectual stature. The battle for the soul of the Anglican Communion is not over; in some senses it may not even have begun. There are ten years to go before the next Lambeth Conference, and we can be fairly certain that while most of the conservative Third-World bishops will spend that time evangelizing and building up their churches, the First-World liberals will be plotting their moves in readiness for the next encounter in 2008.

Probably one of the keys to what happens then will be in the numbers and influence of the women bishops attending Lambeth. In 1988 there were none, but this year there were 11 – all of them First-World liberals. This number is bound to increase by 2008, but the real test will be to see how far the ordination of women to the episcopate spreads across the Communion as a whole. There is little chance that it will catch on in Africa or Asia, where the local culture would hardly tolerate female leadership of that kind, but there are real possibilities in the British Isles and Australia. Scotland, Wales and Ireland could well have women bishops in the next couple of years, though things will be much more difficult in England. Yet that must be the key to dominating the agenda of the Communion as a whole, particularly as long as there is a residual respect in the Third World for the ancient 'mother church'. Any woman bishop appointed in England will be liberal by definition, and she (or they) may well carry a good deal more weight than numbers alone would warrant. Few men would stand up to them in a direct confrontation, and therefore the causes they advocate may well be conceded by default.

Women are often more sympathetic to homosexuality than men, perhaps because they feel less threatened by it. There is already plenty of evidence that the ones most likely to become bishops will show solidarity with another group which they think has been victimized by an uncaring church. Logic is unlikely to play much of a role in this, as emotions, combined with male deference and a sense of fair play take over. Even the

Third-World bishops might find this combination hard to resist, although nobody seriously expects them to change their own views. The result could well be an agreement to live and let live, which is the most the liberals can realistically hope for. For traditionalists in the Western churches, that would spell disaster. It is already very difficult (and in some places impossible) for them to operate freely in churches which ordain women to the presbyterate. Once a female episcopate, supported and seconded by a gay mafia is solidly in place, we may be certain that the conservative cause will be effectively scuppered within the Anglican world. Women and gays in positions of power know that their opponents are not prepared to tolerate them there because to their minds they do not simply represent another 'tradition' within the comprehensive umbrella of Anglicanism. Rather they are in their very persons a denial of the faith once delivered to the saints. The survival instinct alone will ensure that this combination will do everything it can to marginalize and exclude any kind of traditional position.

Traditionalists in the West will have to be on their guard, and they cannot expect to rely on conservative Third-World bishops to fight their battles for them. Of course we must be very grateful for the witness of those churches and rejoice in their fellowship, but in the end we have to fight our own battles. The liberals in our churches are not going to sit back and take 'no' for an answer, and we must be ready for them. Attempts at compromise are futile, because on issues of this kind, no compromise is possible. Putting off the evil day as long as possible will be tempting to many, but that will not work either, since the end result will only be a more traumatic division than will occur in any case. We cannot sit back and relax, waiting for the next Lambeth Conference and hoping that in the meantime, something (the Second Coming, perhaps?) will turn up. If traditional faith and morality are going to survive in the Anglican Communion, and if they are to have any hope of setting the agenda for the future, we have no time to lose. We must be gathering our forces and persuading our supporters to get involved in the decision-making structures of the church now, while there is still time to act. There is no point pretending that the way ahead will be easy or pleasant – there are some hard battles to be fought before victory will be assured. But those who worship God in spirit and in truth know that it is neither by might, nor by power, but by the Spirit of the Lord (Zechariah 4:6) that these battles are fought and won. Those who are for us are stronger than those who are against us, and we must pray that we shall have the courage and the strength to persevere, until we see every knee bowing and every tongue confessing that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

GERALD BRAY