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

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

Churchman

EDITORIAL

To the outside observer, it must appear that the decomposition of the Anglican Communion has advanced another step, with the Archbishop of Singapore's recent consecration of two American clergymen as bishops for the Episcopal Church in the United States. In normal circumstances, such an action would be inconceivable, since no Anglican prelate would try to exercise jurisdiction in a sister church without being invited to do so. But of course (as is usually the case in such matters), the circumstances are anything but normal. At the last Lambeth Conference in 1998, it was made quite clear that there is a rift among Anglicans which goes much deeper than any mere conflict of jurisdiction. In broad, general terms, bishops from the so-called 'first world' (Europe, North America and Australasia) tended to be more liberal on moral issues, particularly on the rights of homosexuals, than did bishops from the so-called 'third world' (Africa, Asia and Latin America). There were exceptions of course, especially among the 'first world' bishops, but it would be fair to say that even the most conservative among them cohabit within the same ecclesiastical structures as their more liberal colleagues. They may disagree with them, of course, but they do not break rank, with the result that widely different opinions and approaches manage to co-exist under a single archiepiscopal umbrella.

This cosy arrangement has now been challenged by Singapore, which is geographically part of the 'third world' but economically and socially part of the 'first'. The Christian church there is healthy and growing, with a clearly charismatic and evangelical tinge to it. Its leaders are well-educated, deeply committed to preaching the gospel and determined not to tolerate moral or spiritual standards which are unbiblical and even openly anti-Christian. All this stands in the sharpest possible contrast to most 'first world' churches, whose leaders are often tongue-tied when it comes to the gospel, and who preach a message of 'tolerance' which extends to almost any kind of moral aberration, but which fails to include those who want to uphold traditional Christian values. Thus, for example, we are currently being told that the Church of England must face up to the widespread pattern of divorce in our society and relax its rules, so that it can minister to as many divorced people seeking remarriage as possible. The idea that lifelong monogamy should be taught and promoted with renewed insistence is respected as a 'valid position held by many Christians', but as a practical option in the present situation it is simply discounted.

Not so in Singapore, or in many other parts of the world. There, it is held that professing Christians should lead changed lives, and adhere to standards of conduct which set them apart from the surrounding world. Social statistics count for very little; what matters to them is that church members should adhere to the gospel which their pastors preach, even if it involves a sacrifice to do so. Archbishop Tay of Singapore would never dream of bowing to popular opinion if that conflicted with biblical standards, but even if it did not, he would probably argue that it is the church's business to teach the world a different way of life, not to conform to it. The difference of approach is so fundamental that it is hard to see how men and churches which subscribe to them can co-exist in the same communion.

And this, of course, is the point. By consecrating two American conservatives, whose main brief will be to oppose the liberal agenda which dominates so much of that church, Archbishop Tay is effectively declaring the Episcopal Church of the USA an internal mission field for Anglicans worldwide. Its leaders can no longer be trusted to preach the gospel, the Archbishop is saying, and so a new leadership must be provided if the essential work of evangelisation is to go forward. The Church of England is protected from such behaviour by the fact of establishment, but it is not difficult to see Archbishop Tay turning his attention to Scotland, for example, where he has already refused to set foot as long as the Bishop of Edinburgh is tolerated as that country's primate. Canada, Australia and New Zealand must also be high on his hit list, and if a worldwide ministry develops from there, who knows where it might stop?

Dealing with an issue of this kind is extremely difficult, because it raises the classical conflict between structure and spirit. No church can long survive without some kind of structure, and the Anglican Communion has always held fast to the hierarchy of bishops, priests and deacons, complete with dioceses and provinces, inherited from the Roman Empire and the medieval church. It is not a perfect system, and has always had to face rivals like presbyterianism and congregationalism, but on the whole it has worked reasonably well as long as the traditional doctrine and morality of the church has been preserved. But episcopalianism has proved dangerous whenever bishops have abandoned their role as guardians and teachers of the faith, and turned themselves into avant-garde prophets instead. In those cases, the spirit has changed, and the structure has been compromised as a result. This has

happened in England, as those who remember the late E W Banes (Birmingham, 1929-53) and Mervyn Stockwood (Southwark, 1969-80) can testify. Recent appointments have been less colourful, but there are at least some prelates in the current House of Bishops who would happily see themselves as their spiritual heirs.

Nevertheless, it is in the other churches of the Anglican Communion, where bishops are more or less freely elected, that the real radicals have surfaced. Richard Holloway (Edinburgh) and John Shelby Spong (Newark, NJ) are hard to beat, and must serve as a salutary warning to those in England who think that the free election of bishops would improve the situation here. Furthermore, it is also the case that in most Anglican churches, the bishop has much greater power within his diocese than his English colleagues have, because there is seldom any mechanism of private patronage which can to some extent counter episcopal excesses. As a result, many dioceses are virtually monochrome in terms of churchmanship, and those who do not conform to the bishop's wishes are squeezed out. This is an unhealthy situation at the best of times, but when a bishop is intent on destroying not only his church but the Christian faith as well, it is catastrophic. In such circumstances, outside intervention of the kind demonstrated by Archbishop Tay, may be the only way of achieving anything at all.

What the latest events signify, and what even the last Lambeth Conference began to recognize, is that the traditional territorial system of episcopacy is no longer workable. If the Anglican Communion is going to remain theologically pluralistic, then there will have to be provision for episcopal oversight to be made available along theological lines. Conservatives will have to be given bishops who share their understanding of the Christian gospel, wherever they happen to reside, and those who prefer some form of theological liberalism will likewise have to be catered for. At the moment, the latter are clinging to the excuse that they are the lawful successors of the apostles in their respective sees, but if they do not preach (or even understand) the apostles' faith, such a claim is bound to ring very hollow indeed. Conservatives like Archbishop Tay simply have to call their bluff, and let the chips fall where they may.

Perhaps the Anglican Communion will be able to draw back from this particular brink, but if it does, it will have to do so in a way which satisfies

the demands of traditional Christians for a ministry which reflects orthodox, biblical teaching. Even in England, the liberal establishment cannot expect to have everything its own way for ever. Evangelicals (and recently many Anglo-Catholics as well) have often voted with their feet, retreating into their parishes and keeping the bishop at arm's length as much as they can. But things are changing, not least because it is those conservative parishes which are increasingly standing out as both the spiritual and (from the establishment's point of view, more importantly) financial powerhouses of the church. They know that the structures are unlikely to hold up for long without their support, and with that knowledge comes the power to initiate change. What Archbishop Tay has done may seem extreme right now, but by the time of the next Lambeth Conference it may be looking like a forward and far-sighted move, designed to preserve not only what is best in Anglicanism, but more seriously still, what is essential to Christianity as well.

GERALD BRAY

The editorial board would like to apologize for the omission of the author's name from an article published in the last issue of Churchman. The article entitled 'Admitting Children to Holy Communion' was in fact written by the Rev Donald Allister, Chairman of Church Society, and had been published previously as a Reform booklet.