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Churchman

EDITORIAL I

Does Reform have a place within the evangelical firmament of the Church of England, not to mention the wider Anglican Communion? The question is prompted by the recent decision of the council of Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, to ban meetings of the local student branch of the movement until a policy can be formulated on the 'issue'. But what, exactly, is this 'issue' on which such a policy now has to be made? Reform is an organization in good standing within the Church of England, and is even listed as such in the Church's official Yearbook. It does not appeal to everyone and is actively disliked by some, but so are many other societies which have not attracted anything like the same amount of opprobrium. To ban an organization from meeting while the case for or against it is still pending seems to be an extreme step, especially when one considers that it is a fundamental principle of English justice that a man is innocent until he is proved guilty. It is sadly true, of course, that some Evangelicals are prone to excuse themselves from the norms of civilized behaviour when these norms are inconvenient, and those who beat the drum of political correctness have seldom worried too much about respecting the opinions of others. To that extent at least, the Spanish Inquisition and the Movement for the Ordination of Women belong to the same intellectual tradition, and it probably ought not to surprise us if there are politically correct Evangelicals at Wycliffe Hall and elsewhere who are tempted to join them.

The issue here, it should be clear from the start, has nothing to do with the rightness or wrongness of what Reform stands for. Even some of its loyal members may have doubts about some of its policies, and those who do not belong to it have every right to disagree with its principles as much as they like. Reform has never attempted to coerce others into joining, and does not want to impose its agenda on the Church by any means other than consent. Those who have attended its conferences know that it is a democratic body where many different views can be (and are) expressed in complete freedom. True, it is a political body with a fairly clear agenda, but that is legitimate within the structures of the Church, and a theological college is an ideal place for the controversies which the Reform programme arouses to be sorted out. The issue which confronts the governing body of Wycliffe Hall is not whether Reform's agenda is right or wrong, but whether a law-abiding, recognized Anglican society has the right to function within a theological college which

purports to stand for the same principles and churchmanship as that society does. It is, or ought to be, a simple case of freedom of speech for all those who are prepared to play by the normal rules of civilized society. From that standpoint, it is difficult to see that any serious case can be mounted against Reform, and the whole matter should be dropped immediately.

This is, however, unlikely to happen and to explain why, other reasons must be sought. Those who oppose Reform do so because to their minds it is the evangelical equivalent of the National Front or the Ku Klux Klan. They think that, under the guise of biblical traditionalism, Reform is a misogynist organization, out to expel women from the ministry of the Church. They also believe that it is prepared to use its financial clout in the larger evangelical parishes to carve out a niche for itself, which once formed, will be impregnable. Neither bishops nor open Evangelicals will be allowed to get a foot in the door, as soon as a Reform 'church within the Church' is established, preferably in the shape of a flying bishop, extra-territorial diocese or whatever. When members of Reform protest that their aim is to win the nation for Christ in the most biblically faithful and efficient way possible, these critics claim that they are being deceptive. To their minds, it is they, with their policies of inclusiveness towards women, homosexuals, liberals and unbelievers of every stripe, who are the true evangelists, reaching out to those dark corners of the land where uptight, middle-class Reform types are unwilling or unable to penetrate. The catastrophic decline in church membership since 1992 means nothing to them, since in their world view, those who have left the church are mostly fuddy-duddies opposed to their agenda. Evangelism, they will point out, is mainly concerned with those outside anyway, and foot draggers within the church do nothing to advance its mission. Of course, few of these evangelists are interested in trying to persuade the outsiders whom they are so concerned about to step inside. That would be a shoddy perversion of true Christian love, reducing the grand task of preaching the gospel to the level of a recruitment campaign, and it would do nothing to lower the barriers between the church and the world, which is such an important part of their mission.

Reform's supporters, on the other hand, listen to this kind of argument in amazement and disbelief. How is it possible that otherwise intelligent people can have deluded themselves to such an extent about the nature of the gospel, and the place of the church in proclaiming it? Nobody can quarrel with the

fact that the Church of England is more marginalized today than it has been since Cromwell's time – and the reasons then were very different from what they are now. The 'open' agenda, however impressive it may sound at conferences or in General Synod, has simply not worked. Reform members do not claim to have a magic solution to the Church's problems, but they do believe that adherence to biblical Christianity, as it has traditionally been understood, is necessary if the mission of the Church is to mean anything at all – let alone make advances in a hostile world. They are not interested in 'scalp-hunting' for its own sake – Reform is not a 'Church growth' movement – but they do believe in conversion, and tend to think that those who are converted will want to join the Church of their own accord.

Furthermore, although a sovereign God can and does convert people in any number of different ways, he has appointed a preaching and teaching ministry in his church and decreed that primary responsibility for these things will be given to men, not women. That does not mean that women (or other men, for that matter) have a lesser ministry; indeed, it can be argued that the preaching and teaching function does not operate effectively without the complementary functions of pastoral care and 'gossiping the gospel' which women, in particular, are often so good at. As a famous misogynist once said, the eye is not the ear, and 'those parts of the body which seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honourable we treat with special honour'. Keeping them out of the limelight does not mean undervaluing them, but the very opposite.

The heart of the matter, as is so often the case, comes down to the most fundamental theological point of all. Is the human race lost in sin and wickedness, or not? Is there a divine plan of redemption which has been revealed once for all in Jesus Christ, the Son of God and only way to the Father, or do we believe in a kind of self-redemption, perhaps with the help of a support group called the 'church', which strives for wholeness and fulfilment, even if these things contradict the outdated teachings of the New Testament? Most evangelical opponents of Reform would recoil from such a description of them and their motives, but we need to point out just what the theological roots of their confused thinking are. So-called 'open' Evangelicalism exists because a generation of Evangelicals has gone light on theology, preferring a gospel of 'niceness' to the hard truths of Scripture. 'Niceness' does not mention sin, and it puts a high value on agreement and

co-operation. In the Church of England, that naturally means going along with the prevailing majority and not standing out as awkward guests who lack the right wedding garment for the feast. Members of Reform are not 'nice' in this sense, and they have a distressing tendency to talk about sin as if it mattered. This is the real reason why they are banned, and there is no point in pretending otherwise. The upholders of Christ's gospel will always be persecuted for telling the truth, but their consolation is that in that respect they have the privilege of suffering for (and along with) their Master. They may not be welcome at certain evangelical venues, but we may rest assured that there is a place of honour reserved for them around the throne of glory, as there is for all who follow the way of the cross.

As an organization, Reform has come and no doubt one day Reform will go. But the gospel it seeks to proclaim will not go away, and if those who seek to proclaim it today are silenced, it will return with a vengeance in the years ahead. John Wycliffe was disgraced and forced to leave Oxford because he dared to speak out against the political correctness of his time, but the message he proclaimed was not silenced, and 500 years later a college was built to his memory, almost on the very spot where he first preached. Those who follow Wycliffe's example today can take heart from this, and know that long after 'open Evangelicalism' has gone the way of all flesh, the message which they are proclaiming will still be preached, and will still be effective in winning men and women for Christ, not least in the very place where they are now being reviled for his sake.

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