

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

Churchman

EDITORIAL

Benedictus benedicat

One of the things you realise in pastoral ministry is how easy it can sometimes be to solve other people's problems. Parishioners come to you in deep distress over something that means a great deal to them, but to you it seems relatively trivial and easy to resolve with a little effort and goodwill. That it might not seem so simple to them is something else that you have to learn, and it can be very frustrating to have to deal with small problems that just will not go away. As Anglicans, many of us think that we have a simple solution for the Roman Church's internal difficulties. Priests are constantly getting involved in sexual scandals? Then let them marry, and they will live happily ever after. Attendance at mass is down? Preach the gospel, and the flocks will come flooding back. The clergy are out of touch with the laity? Establish synodical government with full lay participation, and everyone will be on board. In other words, have a reformation and all Rome's troubles will be over. It works for us (more or less) so what are they waiting for?

Armchair advice from Anglicans or other Protestants is easy to give, but we do not have to face the huge task of implementing it in a church which cannot change so radically overnight. Rome was not built in a day, and although it could certainly be dismantled faster than it was erected, the process would still take time, involve unforeseen complications and leave at least some bitterness and division in its wake. As outsiders, we do not have to deal with that, so our advice can stand and we can continue to promise results that we shall never have to deliver.

Of course, Anglican leaders are far too modest and self-effacing to suggest that anyone should follow their example, and so this kind of advice stays where it originated and is not transmitted to the Vatican. Instead, we are now on the receiving end, with no less a figure than Pope Benedict XVI proposing what to him must seem like an equally easy solution to the current problems besetting Anglicanism. He knows, as we all do, that in many parts of the world the Anglican leadership has abandoned the historic Christian faith, leaving large

numbers of faithfully orthodox people stranded in their wake. It might not be so bad if those leaders could show some humility and accept that their views are untested novelties that not everyone should be expected (or obliged) to go along with, but it is the nature of the liberal beast to devour all before it and no such tolerance is forthcoming. The liberals use words like ‘justice’, ‘freedom’ and ‘equality’, but these terms mean what they want them to mean, and nothing more. They certainly do not involve accommodating people with radically different views, especially not if those views have held the field for the past 2000 years of oppression and injustice. The Holy Spirit is alive and active in the church today, they claim, which apparently means that he is now saying the exact opposite of what he has been saying all along, and saying it loud and clear through the mouths of his chosen prophets—them.

The pope does not subscribe to that view of the work of the Spirit, and from a distance he can see that our problems with it are easy to resolve. What is needed is a special jurisdiction, called in Rome a ‘personal ordinariate’ or ‘personal prelature’ that can foster Catholic orthodoxy with something of a traditional Anglican face. According to this way of thinking, those who cannot accept the synodically-legitimated apostasy of some Anglican churches can be accommodated by carving out a reserved space in which they can continue to function as they have done. In practice, this means excluding the ministry of those whom the dissidents are unable to recognise, which means essentially, though not exclusively, the ministry of women. There is no real reason why such a special arrangement cannot be made, even if it looks messy to people with tidy (and narrow) minds. Rome is prepared to accept the continued use of certain Anglican forms, like clerical marriage, within the personal ordinariate, despite the fact that this will almost certainly create difficulties in dealing with priests outside it who will still be committed to celibacy. The papacy is prepared to live with this, at least for the present because it sees it as a secondary matter that should not be a barrier to communion with fellow Catholics.

The sad thing about this is that Anglican leaders seem to lack any such perspective and are almost completely devoid of a similar spirit of generosity towards those in their own church who differ from them. The creation of reserved spaces for the traditionally orthodox would certainly cause some bureaucratic upheavals here and there, but it would not undermine the unity of the church and might even strengthen it by removing a bone of contention

that is now dividing it and causing bitterness. Yet whenever this has been suggested, the proponents of equality, freedom and justice go berserk. Perhaps the most fatuous of their claims is the one that says that if a door is closed to a woman bishop it will imply that her orders are inferior or even totally invalid. This argument ignores the fact that no bishop can go wherever he likes and do whatever he wants. The idea that an episcopal jurisdiction must be territorial has no basis in Scripture, tradition or reason, and the most that can be said for it is that it is an unfortunate legacy of the medieval church, although that is not entirely true either. As bishops in the Church of England well know, there are parts of some dioceses that they cannot enter—Oxbridge colleges for instance, or royal chapels—because these are designated peculiars and are off-limits to them. In Cambridge, for example, the local diocesan bishop of Ely is the visitor of two ancient colleges (Peterhouse and Jesus) but has no say over what goes on in their chapels because of their special exempt status. Has anyone ever known a bishop of Ely to complain about this shocking disregard for his territorial jurisdiction?

No, is the obvious answer, and the pope has seen what many Anglicans have not—that a solution to the problem could easily be found if only there were a little effort and goodwill among those responsible for finding it. The difficulty is not in the mechanism but in those who are being asked to adopt it, and here the pope has found himself in the position of the pastor who knows how to solve other people's problems but cannot get them to see how simple it really is. He is right of course, but are Anglican leaders ever likely to realise this and do for themselves what he has so generously offered to do for them? It must sadly be admitted that this is not very likely and in all probability the pope's good advice will go unheard and unacted upon.

On the Anglican side, one of the complicating factors is the perception that the main objectors to recent novelties in the church are Anglo-Catholics. In fact, Evangelicals are just as opposed, but they are ignored, as are the broad church traditionalists who belong to organisations like the Prayer Book Society. Some Anglo-Catholic leaders have greeted the papal proposals with a degree of enthusiasm that has caused many observers to question how loyal they are to their own church and it must be admitted that Anglo-Catholicism embraces extremists who remain Anglicans only by an intellectual sleight of hand that amounts to dishonesty. Whatever they may think, Anglicans are Protestants

who embraced the sixteenth-century Reformation and to deny this is to deny their very identity. In this sense, it is not unfair to say that Anglo-Catholicism has always been a counterculture within Anglicanism, and it is not surprising that the tensions created by this will eventually lead to Rome. That was true of John Henry Newman, and it has been true to varying degrees ever since. The pope's offer puts these Anglo-Catholics on the spot—do they really have the courage of their convictions, or are they determined to go on rowing against the current in a church which frankly does not want them? For this is the other side of what has become clear since the pope made his offer. Far from being anxious or upset at the prospect of losing up to a thousand clergy, plus an indeterminate number of laity, the liberals who control the church structures appear to be only too glad to see them go. 'Good riddance' seems to be their motto, followed by: 'Now we can get on with what we want to do.' If Anglo-Catholics ever felt they belonged to a wider church that respected and appreciated their contribution to its life, they know better now. Not only will they not be missed; their departure is eagerly awaited a substantial number of church people who see them as nothing but a nuisance. Lack of charity could hardly be more explicit than that.

It is at this point that Evangelicals come in. No-one would claim that there is much love lost between them and the Anglo-Catholics and some Evangelical clergy are so rabidly anti-Catholic that they are prepared to deface or destroy anything that even vaguely hints at a Catholicising tendency, like wearing clerical robes, or encouraging reverent silence in worship. Dumbing down to the lowest common denominator has become almost obligatory in some Evangelical parishes, since to expect anything more might fail to reach the unchurched (who are not there anyway.) Evangelical objections to Anglo-Catholicism are rooted in a very different view of grace, which includes the doctrine of the church, ministry and sacraments as well as more intellectual things like justification by faith. These objections apply to moderate Anglo-Catholics as well as to the extremists, whose 'bells and smells' are a complete turn-off to most Evangelicals, as is their innate sense of spiritual superiority. Evangelicals are by no means devoid of that, but at least they base their claims on the teaching of Scripture, not on ritual and fancy dress. Put all this together and what we find is an antipathy between Evangelicals and Anglo-Catholics (on both sides, it must be said) that has made real co-operation very difficult, if not impossible even when they basically agree, as on the women's issue,

where both now seem likely to suffer the consequences of their dislike of each other. For even if special jurisdictions were to be created, as the pope clearly sees they ought to be, it is not certain that the clergy of one of these traditions would accept the episcopal oversight of the other. Some Evangelicals may even prefer a liberal woman bishop to an Anglo-Catholic, so strong is their feeling against the latter. Can we be surprised if the liberals do not take us seriously?

If the Anglo-Catholics desert the Anglican Communion in significant numbers, that will leave a church with only liberals and Evangelicals contending for control, and no-one can doubt where that will lead. It has almost become a tradition among Evangelicals appointed to the episcopal bench that the first thing they do is tell everyone how comprehensive and understanding they will be of those who differ from them. To be fair, they are almost always true to their word on this, which in practice means that whatever remains of their Evangelical faith is either ditched or mothballed for retirement, when it may be safe to bring out the Bible again (and perhaps even listen to what it says.) The sad fact is that Evangelicals are easily bought off by the establishment—some cave in for no more than a canonry—and the establishment knows it. Unless and until Evangelicals can address and resolve this problem, they will never amount to much in church life and the liberals will have everything their own way, as they fully realise.

This matters, because if the Anglo-Catholics can be disposed of on the women question, the liberals will renew their efforts to ordain practising homosexuals and will squeeze out Evangelicals just as they are now squeezing out Anglo-Catholics. Right now there are many Evangelical leaders who are still publicly opposed to homosexual practice, but for how long? Once minds are focussed and the pressure is on, the likelihood is that this stance will change very quickly. Nobody will force Evangelicals to become practising homosexuals themselves, so they will be able to salve their consciences by insisting that they only approve of such conduct for others, whom they must tolerate for the sake of the church's comprehensiveness. We can write the script now—the only uncertain element is the time-frame for this scenario to develop.

Meanwhile, it is hard to see what the immediate future will bring—will Anglo-Catholics respond to the pope's overtures and leave the church or will the Anglican establishment take fright at the last minute and make the concessions

needed to get them to stay? We do not yet know, but what does seem clear is that Evangelicals, who are not directly affected by the pope's overtures, now need to get their act together and define their constituency more precisely if they are ever going to mount a credible and consistent case for their views. At the very least, it should be clear that anyone who is not prepared to sign on to the Fellowship of Confessing Anglicans should not be included in any explicitly Evangelical organisation, however sympathetic they may be to the Evangelical cause in other ways. We do not want to excommunicate such people, but no campaigning body can operate effectively if it has a substantial membership that does not want to commit itself to anything that might force them to take a clear stand. Pandering to that sort of person has been all too common in Evangelical circles, with the result that Evangelical institutions are often paralysed and unable to act decisively on any important issue. It should also be clear that supporters of women's ordination (and consecration) have no place in specifically evangelical organisations either. Not only have they gone against the teaching of Scripture, which is what Evangelicals are expected to abide by, but they have also made a secondary issue primary and have joined forces with those who are prepared to exclude Bible-believing people from the church. Some will deny that this is their intention, but their presence in Evangelical organisations makes it impossible for the latter to defend clear Evangelical positions which are then given up by default. We may continue to love and respect 'open Evangelicals' as friends, but they cannot be allowed to dictate the Evangelical agenda, as they did when women's ordination was voted through in 1992. We may happily tolerate those who differ from us on such matters, but we should be clear as to where they (and we) actually stand and go our separate ways when necessary.

If Evangelicals can get their act together and stand firm against the inroads of liberalism, there may yet be good reason to look back on the most recent form of papal aggression as the moment when reality finally broke in and took hold of our minds. If that happens, we shall have good reason to thank the pope for making us sit up and think, and to bless him for his uninvited pastoral intervention in our affairs. *Benedictus benedicat*, and may we who receive his blessing be duly grateful to God for the way he can work through the most unlikely people and circumstances.

GERALD BRAY