

LATIMER BRIEFING 1

# THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND:

## WHAT IT IS, AND WHAT IT STANDS FOR

BY R. T. BECKWITH



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## **To George Carey, Archbishop and Anglican**

**This brief restatement of neglected and forgotten truths is by kind permission dedicated**

Dear Lord Carey,

In inviting you to accept the dedication of this little book, and your acceptance of the invitation, attention was drawn to the fact that, though old friends, we do not agree upon everything! However we do agree in our common commitment to Anglican Christianity, which the book is designed to explain and commend. The book is sometimes outspoken on the other side of contemporary questions from the side which you are thought to favour (though more often, perhaps, on the same side). After 14 years, the book has now been updated for a new readership.

With prayerful good wishes,

Yours as ever,

Roger Beckwith.

## **I. What is the Church of England?**

### **1.1. *Its Origins***

The people of Great Britain are a single nation with a single monarch and government. Yet they are spread over four countries (England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland) and have in their veins the blood of different races who have successively ruled over part or the whole of their realm. At the beginning of the Christian era, the country was divided among several tribes of Celts, and much of it was under Roman rule. This was the situation when the Christian gospel was first brought to our southern shores, probably from Gaul (modern France) in the second century. The church in Rome was already becoming the most influential church in the western world, mainly because it was located in the capital of the Roman Empire; and it was afterwards to help hold Christendom together even when the Empire collapsed; but it had not yet started claiming the right to *govern* other churches, and for many centuries the Celtic churches had great independence. It was Celtic missionaries, such as Ninian (died about 432), Patrick (died about 461) and Columba (died 597), who spread the gospel to Scotland and Ireland.

In 449, after the withdrawal of the Romans, the invasion of Britain by the pagan Anglo-Saxons began, as a result of which the Christian Celts were driven to the extremities of the land. The reconversion of the country was partly the work of Celtic missionaries from the north, beginning in 635, and led by Aidan, but partly the work of Roman missionaries from the south, who were sent to Kent from Rome by Pope Gregory the Great as early as 597 under the leadership of Augustine (not to be confused with the great theologian Augustine of Hippo, two centuries before). At the Synod of Whitby in 664, even the Christians of

Northumbria adopted Roman customs, but Celtic customs survived much longer in Cornwall, Wales, Scotland and Ireland.

Because Augustine's mission had been sent directly from Rome, the English church recognised that it owed a special debt to the church in Rome. Right up to the sixteenth century, despite the increasingly extravagant claims of the popes to temporal authority and the tensions with monarchs in England and other countries which developed, the relation between the church in Rome and the church in England was a close one. The breach, when it came, was necessary, but it was a sad necessity.

### ***1.2. The Middle Age and the Need for Reform***

The periodic tensions between popes and kings after the Norman Conquest were not, of course, always the fault of the pope. The king was sometimes equally or more to blame, and if the pope had always been upholding spiritual values against worldly-minded kings, the history of Europe would have been different. But, regrettably, the later Middle Ages were a time of grave moral and spiritual decline, in which the clergy, the monastic orders and the papacy itself fully shared. In such circumstances, the claim of the pope to have supreme authority over princes, to be entitled to intrude foreigners into bishoprics, or to support bishops against their monarch, was naturally felt to be a crying evil, and fostered the wish to reassert national independence. Whatever the original motives of the papal claims, or the abuses which they sought to remedy, the fact was that they were relatively new, and were now, often enough, being made by popes of worldly character, who sold ecclesiastical posts to the highest bidder.

The condition of the church had indeed become deplorable. The monasteries, which had long set the standard in godliness, were now largely infected by idleness and luxury, the outcome of their great wealth. The bishops, who likewise enjoyed extensive earthly possessions, were frequently preoccupied with

affairs of state. Many of the theologians had overlaid and perverted the gospel with unbiblical speculations. Ignorance, avarice and unchastity were rampant among the clergy, and sometimes, when they committed crimes, they were protected by 'privilege of clergy' from being called to account. The laity, who had neither the Bible in English nor services in English, were, for lack of sound instruction and good example, the victims of gross superstition. It would be foolish to suppose that, in a period which continued to produce the wonderful churches, cathedrals and abbeys of which we are the heirs, devotion to God was dead, but it was undoubtedly very sick. Despite the efforts of mediaeval reformers like John Wycliffe, New Testament Christianity was now confused with grievous error in the popular mind.

### **1.3. *Henry VIII and the Breach with Rome***

When the formal breach with Rome finally came, it was precipitated by Henry VIII's desire to be rid of his first wife. It is possible to make excuses for this shameful incident, on the grounds of the insecurity of the Tudor dynasty and its need for a male heir, or on the grounds of the doubt that had been felt about the legality of Henry's marriage to Catherine of Aragon (as being within the prohibited degrees) when it was first contracted. However, Henry's subsequent conduct makes any such excuses unconvincing.

At the same time, the incident is disgraceful not only to Henry but also to the papacy. Not very long before, one of the popes had permitted the King of Castile to take a second wife because his first was childless; and the main reason why Henry was now refused an annulment was probably that his wife was related to the Emperor Charles V, whom the pope (Clement VII, a man of weak character) was afraid to offend.

#### ***1.4. Edward VI and the Doctrinal Reformation***

Much more important than any of these considerations, however, is the fact that the contemporary reform of doctrine and practice, since known as the Protestant Reformation, took place in many parts of Europe and not simply in the British Isles; and everywhere it took place there was a breach with Rome, because Rome resisted all far-reaching reform. Henry's desire for an annulment of his marriage was therefore simply the occasion of the English Reformation and not its underlying cause.

Indeed, despite the breach with Rome, reform was not able to make much progress during the reign of Henry, who was a rebellious Roman Catholic rather than a Protestant, and it had to wait for the accession of his son Edward VI. Henry patronised Renaissance learning, but was less interested in applying it to religious reformation. His other main 'reform' was the somewhat ambiguous one of dissolving and plundering the monasteries. He did allow some use to be made of Coverdale's English Bible, but two things had to wait until the next reign. One was the introduction of biblical services, and in English not Latin, while the other was the revival of biblical preaching.

One of the best known sights in Oxford (where the author lives) is the Martyrs' Memorial, erected to commemorate the burning of Bishops Ridley and Latimer and of Archbishop Cranmer, which took place in Oxford in 1555 and 1556 respectively. This was after Edward also had died and Mary had come to the throne, bent on reversing the Reformation. It is unfashionable today to describe the three bishops' deaths at the stake as martyrdoms. In a generation when few church people have strong convictions about anything, a man who went to the stake rather than recant is considered as a victim of his own bigotry quite as much as of the bigotry of those who burned him.

But fashion, as so often, is a poor guide. The three bishops died for the truths of the Reformation. And, without idolizing the sixteenth-century Reformers, it has to be said that the two chief points for which they contended were two of the fundamental truths of Christianity, which had not been formally denied in the mediaeval church but had been fatally obscured.

The first of these truths is the doctrine of revelation. It teaches that God has revealed himself uniquely through Jesus Christ, and through the prophets and apostles who bear witness to Christ, and that the permanent written form of his revelation is Scripture.

So, if you are concerned to know what God has revealed, you cannot be satisfied simply to know what has been handed down from generation to generation by tradition, or what contemporary bishops and theologians declare. You may and should go on to ask, but is this what the Bible teaches?

The Reformers did go on to ask this, and in many cases it cost them their lives. They discovered that the teaching of Christ and the apostles had become corrupted as it had been handed down. They discovered that much of what contemporary theologians and bishops were teaching - even, much of what the Bishop of Rome was teaching - was different from what the Bible teaches. But when they called for such teaching to be corrected by the Bible, they were not thanked for it but condemned.

The second of the great truths of the Reformation is the doctrine of salvation. It teaches that man is not justified in God's sight by his own efforts but by God himself. Nor is he justified by what God does *in* him, but by what God has already done *for* him, through Jesus Christ, in whom we must place our trust. Christ on the cross has paid the just penalty for our sins, so that, by repenting of them and putting our faith in Christ, we may be acquitted of them, and thus saved. Even the reception of sacraments and the doing of good works are no substitute for

faith in Christ, our only Saviour. Without faith sacraments are not efficacious, and good works only result from the repentance which accompanies faith.

Here, as the Reformers saw, was the most important matter on which tradition had gone astray - on which the Bible taught one thing and most church leaders of the day taught another. But here again the Reformers were not thanked for pointing the fact out. On the contrary, their own teaching, on justification by grace through faith, was caricatured and condemned.

Of course, the doctrine of revelation and the doctrine of justification by faith were not the only truths which the Reformers were concerned to reaffirm. On the basis of Holy Scripture (applied with the aid of reason), they attempted a comprehensive reform of whatever was amiss in church life. In England, the debate concentrated in a remarkable way on the sacrament of holy communion. The immediate cause of the condemnation of many of the Reformers was their denial of transubstantiation and the mass-sacrifice, and their advocacy of a more spiritual view of Christ's presence in the sacrament, and of the New Testament doctrine that Christ's sacrifice for our sins took place once for all at Calvary (Rom. 6:10; Heb. 10:10; 1 Pet. 3:18), and therefore does not take place every time a priest celebrates mass.

However, what the Reformers maintained in this connection was far from being unrelated to the two great truths of the Reformation. The doctrine of *revelation* was the basis on which they attempted to get back to biblical teaching about the sacrament; and, as to the doctrine of *salvation*, Cranmer's Communion service (substantially that of the 1662 Prayer Book) has been well described by Gregory Dix as 'the only effective attempt ever made to give liturgical expression to the doctrine of justification by faith alone'.

Of course, the truths which the Reformers reasserted were

not new. They *were* based on the Bible and were well understood in the early church. Nor had they been wholly forgotten during the Middle Ages, although, in so far as they were remembered, they had tended to become minority views. The Reformers were by no means without debts to the mediaeval theology in which they had been trained, though they viewed it through the medium of the Greek learning of the Renaissance (and especially through the medium of the Greek New Testament). They thus reformed it, using the new learning in the service of faith.

Moral reform was introduced into the Church of Rome as well, though doctrinal reform continued to be resisted there, and the Bible and the services remained for another 400 years (though happily no longer) in Latin.

### ***1.5. The Elizabethan Settlement***

The persecution which engulfed Cranmer and his fellow-Reformers, though severe, was short-lived. With the accession of Elizabeth I in 1558, the work of the Reformers was progressively restored, in a slightly modified form. The settlement that was made left much of the ancient constitution of the Church of England unchanged, but with certain significant developments, due to the Reformation.

The monarch was now unambiguously the supreme governor of the national church, without any half-acknowledged allegiance to the Bishop of Rome. The formularies of faith were now the ancient creeds, supplemented only by the documents in which the Reformers had formulated the great biblical truths of the Reformation, namely the 39 Articles (based on Cranmer's 42 Articles) and the doctrinal parts of Cranmer's Prayer Book, notably the Catechism. This Prayer Book was now the liturgy of the Church of England: it was in the English language, and was fully conformed to the teaching of the Bible. At

the heart of the life of the Church of England, however, stood the Bible itself - the English Bible, as translated by Tyndale and Coverdale, now regularly read in the services of the church.

The Elizabethan Settlement defined permanently the character of Anglicanism. The constitution of the Church of England has never been changed since, but only modified in detail. The monarch remains the supreme governor, though now as a constitutional, not an absolute, monarch: and in 1688 it was made explicit (after the attempt of James II to do so) that the monarch could never renounce that supremacy, by again submitting himself and his church to the Bishop of Rome. The formularies of faith remain what they were, and in the new Canons and Declaration of Assent, introduced in the 1960s and 1970s, they are specified as the Creeds, the 39 Articles and the Book of Common Prayer, these being recognised as faithful expressions of the teaching of the Bible. For worship, the standard liturgy remains the Book of Common Prayer, according to its 1662 revision: the widely used services of *Common Worship* are in fact only a permitted alternative to the Book of *Common Prayer*, and they are not among the formularies of faith. The English Bible of Tyndale and Coverdale has been several times revised - in 1611 (the Authorized Version), in 1881-94 (the Revised Version) and in 1952 (the Revised Standard Version) - and many independent translations have recently been added; but the old translation, especially in its 1611 form, continues to hold its own in popular esteem.

The permanence of the Elizabethan Settlement is symbolised by the fact that Richard Hooker, the most eminent of Elizabethan theologians and the classical expositor and defender of that settlement, is generally recognised as the greatest and most characteristic Anglican theologian of any period. All subsequent schools of thought in the church like to claim him as their own and are content to defer to his views.

## 1.6. *Subsequent Developments*

The subsequent schools of thought that have arisen in the Church of England have placed particular emphasis on different aspects of historic Anglicanism, in reaction to a perceived or supposed neglect of those aspects. The Caroline High Churchmen of the 17th century and the Anglo-Catholics of the 19th century emphasised the *traditional features* of Anglicanism. The Latitudinarians of the 17th century and the Broad Churchmen or Liberals of the 19th century emphasised the *rational moderation* of Anglicanism. The Puritans of the 17th century and the Evangelicals of the 18th century emphasised the *biblical basis* of Anglicanism. All these emphases reflected real features of the Elizabethan Settlement and of the theology of Hooker, though the subsequent schools of thought developed them in new, and not always defensible, ways.

In historic Anglicanism, as represented by Hooker, tradition and reason are subordinate to the authority of the Bible: to emphasise their authority at the expense of the Bible is therefore a distortion. The Reformers corrected mediaeval tradition by the Bible, so Anglicans have no business to try to restore mediaeval tradition in disregard of the Bible, as Anglo-Catholics have sometimes tried to do. The Reformers also emphasised the mysterious and miraculous character of the biblical gospel as beyond the reach of reason, so Anglicans have no business to use reason as an argument against elements of the biblical faith, as has been sometimes done by Liberals. On the other hand, to interpret the authority of the Bible as leaving no place for tradition or reason is likewise a distortion; and so is a theoretical emphasis on biblical authority which masks an actual neglect of parts of biblical teaching (e.g. on the importance of the sacraments). These are matters in which Puritans and Evangelicals have sometimes erred.

Like the other churches of the Reformation, the

Church of England has been more profoundly influenced in its later history by the Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries than by any other development. The Enlightenment was an intellectual movement as significant as the 15th century Renaissance, and attempted to bring all things under the scrutiny of reason. Modern scientific enquiry is one of its fruits, and the historical approach to the Bible is another.

Unhappily, the men of the Enlightenment often failed to realise that reason has any limits, and, when they applied reason to Christianity, were apt to dismiss its mysterious features as simply irrational, forgetting that man is not the measure of God. David Hume's denial of the credibility of miracles as being contrary to the 'laws of nature', is a good example. His argument, propounded in the 18th century, has influenced philosophical and theological thinking to this day. The schools of thought which have since arisen in the church have represented moderate or extreme expressions of Enlightenment thinking, or else reactions against it. The Latitudinarian school of the 17th century and the Broad Church or Liberal school of the 19th century were more or less moderate expressions, whereas the Deist and Arian schools of the 18th century were extreme expressions. The radical Liberalism of the 1960s and since is another extreme expression. It queries or denies the doctrine of God and of the Incarnation, and the basic principles of Christian morality. The Evangelicals of the 18th century reacted against Enlightenment thinking in favour of the authority of the Bible, and the Anglo-Catholics of the 19th century reacted against it in favour of the authority of tradition. Neither of these movements has as yet been fully assimilated by the Church of England, any more than the Liberal movement has: they exist within it, but still as rival schools which have yet to come to terms. A historical but believing approach to the Bible and theology, and an adequate but not unbalanced

estimate of the authority of tradition and reason, are goals which the Church of England as a whole needs now to set clearly before it, and to strive towards as its primary intellectual task.

The centuries since the Elizabethan Settlement have seen not only the development of different schools of thought in the Church of England, but also the spread of Anglicanism (with its schools of thought) from the British Isles throughout the British Empire and Commonwealth, and even beyond. It has developed into a communion of self-governing national or regional churches, none of which, apart from the Church of England, is any longer an established church (if indeed it ever was). The role of the monarch or civil ruler is therefore different in the other Anglican churches, leaving the bishops with more independent power than in England, and the parishes, usually, with less. Also, the parishes lack the *territorial* character of English parishes. Anglicanism outside England always differs from Anglicanism within it in these two respects, though more from necessity than choice

Some of the churches of the Anglican Communion, however, especially in North America, have in recent years chosen to create other differences as well, under strong Liberal influence. What first attracted outside attention was their introduction of female presbyters and bishops, but the moves they seem to be making since towards a progressive dismantling of Christian doctrine, morality and worship in general, are more significant, and have necessitated the formation of voluntary Anglican bodies, sometimes supported by Anglican churches elsewhere, for the maintenance of historic Anglican principles. As a result of these developments, the Anglican Communion is now in serious danger of disintegration.

Since the national and regional churches of the

Anglican Communion are self-governing, central bodies such as the Lambeth Conference can offer them nothing stronger than advice. This is healthy, so long as they each regulate their life in the light of a clear apprehension of historic Anglican principles, and with a firm determination always to honour those principles. That voluntary bodies should today have to be set up in some of the Anglican churches, to uphold and defend the principles which the church itself ought to be upholding and defending, is a warning sign which needs to be seriously heeded. Otherwise we may soon find ourselves in a situation where some churches which historically belong to the Anglican Communion can no longer be regarded as members of it, because in important respects they have ceased to be Anglican, and have even perhaps ceased to be Christian. However, the constitution of the Anglican Communion, with which it provided itself at the 1930 Lambeth Conference, offers a remedy (of which some of the Third World provinces have already availed themselves), whereby, in extreme circumstances, orthodox provinces are entitled to excommunicate unorthodox.

## **2. What does the Church of England stand for?**

What the Church of England stands for can be clearly discerned in its historic constitution. It is based upon eight principles. These are not party points, though different parties have emphasised one or another of them. They follow directly from the history and ecclesiastical law of the Church of England. Moderate members of all parties have in the past acknowledged them, and in the present confusions of the Church of England could do much to help by acknowledging them again, in a more united, emphatic and balanced way.

These eight principles are partly principles of belief and partly principles of practice. On these principles the Church of England was originally founded, or re-founded at the Reformation, and it is these which chiefly link it with, or distinguish it from, other Christian churches. On the most important of the eight principles, the central place that it gives to the Bible, the Church of England is at one with the reformed churches of mainland Europe and the Free Churches of England, when they are true to themselves (and when it too is true to itself!). In its more traditional features, it is again largely at one with the reformed churches on the continent of Europe (though less so with the English Free Churches), and also, this time, it is largely at one with the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches. Under the authority of Scripture, these traditional features were in the sixteenth century reformed but retained, so that the Church of England maintained a recognisable continuity with the ancient national church of the land, though reformed by Scripture. In this way it kept the allegiance of the main body

of the people of the realm, though teaching them better ways where tradition had become corrupted.

In an ecumenical age like the present, the distinguishing features of Anglicanism can only be advocated with great modesty. We must, of course, be ready to listen to those Christians who differ from us. Yet, as we shall see, the eight principles of the Church of England are all very defensible, and there is no reason to be ashamed of any of them. The danger today is not so much that Anglicans should boast arrogantly about them as that they should lose all confidence in them and even all conception of them. Yet they are very far from being matters of indifference. Each of them stems from a serious decision taken in the past, for the good of the church, on an issue which had to be decided. The decision taken is not always beyond question, but the necessity of taking a decision is. Each principle can be considered individually on its merits, but they ought also to be considered in relation to each other, for there is a consistency about them, derived from the ideal of a reformed catholic Christianity — the eighth and last of the principles listed below.

These principles, having widely commended themselves to the people, as well as the Church of England, were carried by the colonial expansion of its people and the missionary expansion of its church to all parts of what is now the English-speaking world. Beyond those boundaries they are, of course, less widely accepted, though even there the reformed catholic principle makes the common ground with other churches as great as it could be. Real ecumenical progress calls for a clear grasp of where such common ground lies, but it also calls for an equally clear grasp of where the ground is not as yet common.

This clarity is something which the Anglican Church needs for its own good, as well as for its relations with other churches. It cannot build up its people in the faith without knowing what it stands for. It cannot engage in the missionary outreach to lapsed Christians and non-Christians, to which it is called by our Lord's Great Commission, without knowing what it stands for. Few things would be more helpful at this juncture than a clergy which clearly grasped the principles of their church and clearly expounded them to others, especially if there were bishops, and archbishops, capable of giving a definite and convinced lead to the clergy in the teaching task.

First of all, then, the Church of England is:

### **2.1 *A Biblical Church***

The Scriptures are regularly read, in an orderly fashion, and in English, in the course of the appointed services. It is said that no church in Christendom carries this out as fully as the Church of England. Again, Scripture is normative in Anglican teaching, as the supreme standard of belief and behaviour (Articles 6, 20, 32, 39).

Yet it may be wondered how one can say this, at a time when the effects of generations of sceptical biblical criticism are becoming so apparent, in blatant denials of Christian truths and moral standards from within the church (the Anglican church no less than any other). One can only say it because it is the true standpoint of our church, to which we must make every effort to return. The modern historical approach to the understanding of the Bible is something to which we all owe a debt, but it has regularly been linked in practice with a sceptical approach to the content of the Bible. Stemming from the seventeenth and eighteenth century

Enlightenment, modern biblical criticism has habitually confused reason with rationalism. This is a muddle which it is imperative for theologians to disentangle, and Anglican theologians, in loyalty to the scriptural foundations of their church, should take a leading part in the task.

## 2.2 *A Confessional Church*

The Church of England is a church that uses confessions of faith to express the teaching of the Bible. This means that it is a confessional church - something which is often denied, but in the teeth of the facts. Even the laity are required to accept the catholic creeds as conditions of being baptised and confirmed and partaking of holy communion. The catholic creeds, handed down to us by the early Fathers, concentrate on teaching about the Holy Trinity and the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ; but the 39 Articles (to which the church's authorised teachers are required to assent) add teaching on three other important areas of biblical theology, namely Revelation, Salvation and the Sacraments.

The assault by David Jenkins, the former Bishop of Durham, on the teaching of the creeds, was a sign of the times, but so was the rebuff given to his attitude by the General Synod. The Church of England has not yet surrendered to scepticism. Even the House of Bishops, despite its embarrassment, was required by the other houses of the Synod to declare its hand, which it at least began to do in its report *The Nature of Christian Belief* (Church House Publishing, 1986). The 39 Articles are in a more vulnerable position than the creeds, because Liberals have tended to object to their biblicism and Anglo-Catholics to their Protestantism, yet they are acknowledged afresh in the new Canons and the new Declaration of Assent, and a respect for them seems to be growing in unexpected quarters. One of

the most encouraging phenomena of our day is the positive attitude to the Reformation beginning to be taken by Anglo-Catholics, especially in North America, and this includes a real appreciation of the 39 Articles (see particularly *The Thirty-Nine Articles*, ed. G. Richmond Bridge, Charlottetown: St Peter Publications, 1990).

### 2.3 *A Liturgical Church*

Set forms of corporate prayer are called liturgies, and the Church of England is a liturgical church in that it values and uses such set forms for its public services. It does not despise freer forms, whether of the traditional Nonconformist or the recent charismatic kind, but it considers that informal prayer-meetings are a more appropriate setting for them. It denies the charge sometimes levelled against liturgical prayer that it is unspiritual: rather, it considers that where liturgical prayer is deliberately biblical, well tested by time and used in a spirit of devotion, it is spiritual and edifying in the highest degree. It is also particularly suited to permanent and universal themes, whereas free prayer is more suited to occasional and individual ones. Being in set form, liturgy can unite worshippers across time and space.

The 1662 Book of Common Prayer, though now bearing some marks of its age, is a liturgy of the biblical and edifying sort valued by the Church of England, and is a masterpiece of its kind. How far the services of *Common Worship* come up to such a standard is a matter of opinion. Though authorised on the assumption that it is faithful to the teaching of the older formularies, *Common Worship* is certainly not so deliberately biblical, and in two respects it manifests an anti-liturgical tendency, that is, a tendency away from worship in a set form. One is that it is

revolutionary rather than evolutionary in its starting-point, not revising the existing liturgy but substituting for it a selection of ancient sources, which it imitates in a new idiom of English. The other is that, while introducing greater variety and flexibility, suitable to an age of universal literacy like the present, it carries this to an excess which makes congregational worship difficult. The anti—liturgical tendency reached a climax in the Liturgical Commission's report *Patterns for Worship* (Church House Publishing, 1989), even inviting each congregation to make up its own services for each occasion, which in practice could hardly lead to anything but an abandonment of liturgy altogether. It will be surprising if these strange policies do not lead sooner or later to a reaction in favour of a modest revision of the Book of Common Prayer, which ought to have been the policy from the beginning. In the meantime, however, the result has been a virtual abandonment of liturgy by some congregations (especially, it seems, Evangelical ones).

#### **2.4 *A Covenantal Church***

The Church of England can be called a covenantal church because it emphasises God's covenant with his people, which is a covenant not simply with individuals but with families — first with the family of Abraham, Israel, and then with gentile families adopted into the family of Abraham, especially since the coming of Christ. The Church of England therefore practises the baptism of infants, not just adults, but requires of those infants personal reaffirmation of the Christian commitment at the years of discretion, in confirmation. In this way it acknowledges both the priority of God's grace, and the necessity of the individual response of faith, and attempts to combine the values of Baptist practice with those of historic Christianity.

The new Canons of the Church of England encourage the clergy to ensure that the parents of infants brought for baptism are instructed, and allow the baptism to be delayed for this purpose. They do not, however, allow it to be refused, and it is difficult to see how this can be justified theologically either, since the responsibility for the baptism of an infant (like that for the circumcision of an infant) rests on the family. Baptismal rigorism is therefore not something which the Church of England encourages.

The proposal of the Knaresborough report *Communion before Confirmation?* (C.I.O., 1985) to move back to the Roman Catholic age of childhood for first communion, while postponing confirmation to a later age than at present, would probably have the effect of not just changing the order of events but of making confirmation seem pointless. It was neglect of confirmation which led Archbishop Peckham in the thirteenth century to restore the order which we now observe. Even so, adequate instruction proved impracticable in early childhood, so the Reformers deferred confirmation and first communion until the years of discretion. To ignore the lessons of history now, and to reverse these two decisions, would be very unwise, and it is therefore not surprising that the Knaresborough proposals, though now a permitted alternative, have been adopted only in a minority of parishes. Everyone is concerned about lapsed communicants, but the adoption of these proposals would seem likely to add to their number, not to reduce it.

## 2.5 *An Episcopal Church*

As everyone knows, the Church of England is an episcopal church. It values bishops, as an ancient and well tried form of ministry, agreeable to Scripture (though not actually required by Scripture). It believes that they originated before

the end of the apostolic age, when the presbyter-bishop of the New Testament developed out of one office into two. Both the presbyter (or priest) and bishop are viewed by the Prayer Book Ordinal in the New Testament way, as primarily pastors and teachers, though as also having a further important responsibility, in the administration of the sacraments.

It follows that bishops are not just long-range administrators, which the size of dioceses has tended to make them. If they are to exercise their true role as teachers and pastors, towards the laity as well as the clergy, some reduction in the size of dioceses is probably now urgent. We do not want a top-heavy church, or a proliferation of bureaucracy, but we do want real rather than nominal episcopacy.

The proposal to admit women as bishops would be a more obvious denial of the headship of the man, taught by the New Testament (especially St Paul), than their current admission as presbyters; but since the office of presbyter-bishop was originally one, and is still one in concept, both proposals really stand or fall together. The ministry of women is vital, but it is at least questionable whether the ordination of women as presbyters and bishops is necessarily involved in it at all. The introduction of women presbyters and bishops has regularly proved divisive, whereas the lay and diaconal ministry of women has proved fruitful without being controversial.

## **2.6 A Parochial Church**

The Church of England is parochial in that it consists wholly of parishes. It is not content with 'gathered congregations', wherever they can readily be formed, but divides up the

whole country geographically, on a territorial basis, and attempts to form congregations and to provide evangelism and pastoral care in every area - 'to bring the gospel to every man's door'. If used in a generous and not grudging spirit, the parish system can be a valuable aid to any new venture of evangelism.

In practice at least, the parish is the basic unit of Anglican church life, to which the diocese is accessory (not *vice versa*). Whether this will change if dioceses are reduced in size remains to be seen, but the parish will probably continue to be the normal sphere for both clerical and lay ministry.

The viability of the parish is threatened at present by shortage of clergy and money, and by the 'pastoral reorganization' resulting, through which numbers of parishes are put under the nominal care of one pastor, or a 'team-ministry' is substituted for fully parochial oversight. The undeveloped state of lay ministry makes the situation worse. The independence of parishes and their clergy is also endangered by the frequency of 'suspensions of presentation', whereby the parish is put in the care of a temporary priest-in-charge, appointed by the bishop and not by the normal patrons. It is in these matters that the long-range administration of the modern diocese tends to be seen at its worst, with insufficient local knowledge, superficial 'consultation', and money mainly calling the tune.

What is actually needed is, first, a determined appeal to the church for more clergy and for the money to support them, such as Archbishop Coggan issued in the 1970s, and, secondly, better teaching, and training in ministry, for clergy and laity alike.

## 2.7 *A National, Established Church*

The territorial character of the English parish, and the geographical coverage of the whole country by the parochial system, is made possible by the fact that the Church of England is a national, established church. It is because of the establishment that most people in England still regard themselves as 'C of E', and though this may often mean little to them, it provides the church with one of its greatest opportunities at the local level, giving access to homes. A further effect is that occasional churchgoers expect the ministrations of the parish church to be available to them; but we ought not to be grudging about this, since the Church of England has always worked on the charitable presumption that people's professions as Christians are sincere. If they have little understanding, we should instruct them, not exclude them.

The establishment affects the life of the church at national level also. The crowning of the monarch in a church service, which perhaps occurs in no other country today but England, is an important symbol to the nation of its Christian profession. The example of the Queen in society is respected, and her role in the church is valued accordingly. Parliament looks to the national church as a standard-setter to the nation, though the church (as represented by its bishops and clergy) does not always come up to Parliament's expectations.

Establishment means that the church is in a partnership with the state, acknowledging that 'the powers that be are ordained of God' (Rom 13:1), and seeking to work in the utmost harmony with them, though without compromising the gospel message. Anomalies in church-state relations can arise from various causes, such as the

emergence of rival denominations (and today of rival religions), or a decline in churchgoing, or the promotion of secular legislation. Anomalies are a fact of earthly existence, though certainly we must do our best to minimise them. Judged by the number who regularly attend church on Sundays, or even receive the sacrament at major festivals, the Church of England no longer looks like a national church. Yet it still marries about a third of the couples married in England and baptizes a quarter of the infants born there, so regular church attendance is not the only indication of membership. One conceivable result of the fresh initiatives in mission and evangelism now beginning could be to set England once more on the way to becoming a churchgoing nation. If, by God's grace, we succeed in putting the Christian gospel back into the centre of national consciousness, we may win to faith many of those who are at present only formally attached, and a great change in the churchgoing habits of the nation would be a likely result. Another likely result would be to affect the policy of Parliament, and a third would be to place the Christian gospel before the minds of the immigrant non-Christian communities in our midst, as something to be desired rather than feared or despised.

A final result might be to ease present tensions between Parliament and the General Synod. The role of Parliament in church legislation is sometimes resented in synodical circles, but experience shows that the General Synod needs a second chamber, to provide a second opinion, as much as the House of Commons does; and this is a need which Parliament supplies. The crown appointment of dignitaries is also frequently criticised, because of the participation of the prime minister, who could be of any religion or none; but, now that the initiative lies with a church committee (the Crown Nominations Commission), it

is difficult to fault it in principle, however much it might be improved in practice. While the General Synod and Parliament vie with each other for power, there is bound to be tension; but if the gospel were back at the centre of national consciousness (and at the centre of church consciousness as well), harmony would become possible, and artificial grievances would cease to attract attention. God grant that it may happen soon!

## **2.8 *A Reformed Catholic Church***

What gives consistency to the other seven principles, and sums them up, is the fact that the Church of England is a reformed catholic church. The Church of England is reformed in its emphasis on the Bible, in its 39 Articles, in its vernacular worship, and in its recognition of the royal supremacy in its government. But it is also catholic, in that it retains the ancient common heritage of Christendom, in a biblical form. The Church of England acknowledges the role of the church in interpreting the Bible correctly (Article 20), and uses the ancient catholic creeds as examples of such true interpretation. It maintains, as its practice, liturgical worship, infant baptism, episcopal ministry, parochial organization and national establishment, all handed down from antiquity. The Anglican Reformers valued this edifying heritage, well tested over the centuries, and rejected the idea of starting everything afresh, with the unnecessary controversy and practical mistakes which such a course would inevitably lead to. Instead they simply used the standard of Scripture, applied by reason, to correct whatever needed correcting in the church's inherited forms.

The Church of England therefore aims, and claims, to be catholic not sectarian. It does not need to make concessions to *Roman* Catholicism, of the sort sometimes

called for by ecumenical commissions, in order to become catholic. Such concessions, while supposedly making it more catholic, would in reality cause it to be no longer reformed. Conversely, it does not need to divest itself of all that it has inherited from antiquity, in order to make itself more reformed. In doing this, it would cease to be the church of the people, and so would become sectarian rather than catholic. Already there are moves in a sectarian direction among us, from various quarters. They need to be countered, not indulged.

This, then, in the Church of England, and what it stands for. Is it not a church that we should be thankful to belong to, proud to commend to others, and bold to defend against its enemies, whether from without or from within?

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