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Biblical Truth for Today's Church

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LATIMER COMMENT 03

EVANGELICAL ANGLICAN IDENTITY: a theological orientation.

(Submitted to the Consultation of October 1979 by the Latimer House Theological Work Group.)

Theology comes first. We need to recapture a sense of the wholeness of Biblical truth, and not just to reaffirm old truths but to rethink them. The old truths, when rethought biblically, will propel us back to our century with a new concern for holiness in the church and justice in the world. To try to whip up these concerns without the firm biblical basis (and it is sheer folly to think that we possess this basis just because we call ourselves evangelicals) is like trying to drive a car with flat tyres and an empty tank. It is as we rethink and restate these truths (more biblically, not less) that we will be forced to face the ethical and practical issues which occupy Synod agendas and which greet the parish clergyman every time he opens his mail or answers the phone. You don't have to be trendy to be relevant: but you do have to be relevant, and creative, to be biblical.

This is something the Reformers understood well. It simply isn't true that our forefathers were bogged down in debates that aren't relevant today. They were clear-headed men, combining a better biblical knowledge than most of us could boast with a Christian commitment that cheerfully faced persecution the like of which most of us have never known. This is not to assume that they got everything right, or that their ideas can be transplanted directly to the C of E in the 1980s: they themselves would tell us not to be so silly, but to go back to the New Testament and follow their example in thinking it out, praying it through, and putting it into practice. To be more concrete. If we have come to this consultation to discover our contemporary marks of identity, we suggest the following as truths to be reaffirmed, thought through biblically and in the light of our past, integrated with one another, and worked out in their theological and practical implications. (Different parts of this position are, of course, already shared by many other Christians: to state only what evangelicals and no others believe would result in a highly tendentious and unbalanced statement.) We suggest:

1. A reaffirmation of a God-centred Trinitarian understanding of faith and life, in which God's sovereignty overruling all things, and the glory of Christ as the goal of all things, are primary reference points.

This implies: (a) the need to think and act theocentrically, and theologically on every issue (including identity). In practice this means, positively, the reaffirmation of the supreme authority and complete reliability of the Bible, and of the duty of continually reforming the church (evangelicalism included) under it; the crucial importance of exegesis, to understand the human words of scripture which carry this divine authority; the importance of being a confessional church (the position of the Articles is crucial here); the centrality of the ministry of the word, and the primacy of preaching both for evangelism and edification. Negatively, this means not allowing church life to be dominated by economics, sociology, psychology, bureaucracy or politics - including church politics.

(b) the importance of being a worshipping people, and of helping ourselves, and others, to take this seriously by retaining or establishing forms of worship which, while fully intelligible in the twentieth century, will instil a sense of the solemnity of worshipping the Almighty God and an awareness of the continuity of our worship with that of the rest of the church, past, present and in glory, wherever it has been faithful to God's revelation. Here the Book of Common Prayer sets a standard.

(c) the importance of history as the unfolding of God's purposes, and particularly as the sphere of his redemptive activity; the centrality of the incarnation; the historicity of those parts of the biblical narrative which clearly claim to be recording actual events; the interpretative task of the Christian within world history; the value of the Christian tradition as a pointer (subject to Scripture) to the mind of God; the importance of the church as the historical and visible, as well as invisible, people of God, and therefore the importance of its local manifestation, the Christian congregation or parish, within the contexts of the national church (a particularly Anglican responsibility), the worldwide church and the church triumphant; the importance of the historical ministry and sacraments, both as marks of the church's nature as a transcendent corporate body living in space and time under the word of God, and as necessary means by which the historical body of Christ is defined and spiritually (not magically) sustained.

2 A reaffirmation of Christ's finished work of atonement on the cross as the only means of salvation, not to be detracted from (by denying its full representative and therefore substitutionary character) or added to (by human merit or activities, including the sacraments); and a reaffirmation of the historical resurrection as the proof of Jesus' achievement on the cross and the pledge of new life for his people.

This implies; (a) the importance of the cross and resurrection as the ground of the church's life: i.e. a radical view of sin; the centrality of the gospel of grace and forgiveness; the amazing privilege of sonship; God's justification of the sinner by grace alone through faith alone; and the consequent sure hope of eternal life.

(b) the importance of the cross and resurrection as the model for the church's life; i.e. the church's all-important witness to God in the context of suffering, whether her own (in persecution) or that of the world; the need for the church to be continually self-critical and ready for reformation while remaining an historical and visible community (to deny the former is to deny the cross, to forget the latter ignores the resurrection); the importance of the quest for unity, as a call to repentance and restoration of visible fellowship on the basis of the fundamental truths of Scripture (wherever such unity does not already, by God's grace, exist); the consequent willingness to stand over against man-made institutions (as opposed to the God-ordained ministry and sacraments in their essentials); the need for discipline within the church in relation to doctrine and morals; the need for the church to help th03eundergoing crises to receive the gospel and its benefits in their situation.

3. A reaffirmation of the work of the Holy Spirit in the new birth and in sanctification, as the sovereign work of God creating for himself a people by calling them through the gospel and writing his law on their hearts, so that their love for him is not merely obedience to an outward command but the glad response of the heart.

This implies: (a) the importance of personal spiritual life, whether this comes through a clear moment of conversion, a succession of steps, or a gradual process; the importance of personal godliness, holiness, prayer and above all love; the continuing place of the law of God in the life of his people; the need for true revival.

(b) the priesthood of all believers (which, as an Old Testament doctrine, does not devalue the ordained ministry but rather places it in its true context); the significance of every-member ministry in the church; the danger of that 'Protestant Sacerdotalism' in which the minister acts as a barrier between God and the people, whether as an intermediary in worship or a psychological counsellor instead of a pastor.

(c) the church's responsibility towards the world, resulting in the constant need for both evangelism and socially responsible action. This again requires that the message of the cross and resurrection (in which law and love meet) be applied to the world, and a balance maintained between affirming the world (in which God is glorified in his manifold creation, and in the hope of its redemption) and denying the world (as, ultimately, a temporary and fallen order). It means a serious approach to holiness, without either that pietistic withdrawal from the world which has often been used as an easy route to 'sanctification', or that over-reaction against pietism which results in needless compromise, through unthinking conformity to contemporary secular standards, and the fashions of political and social analysis underlying them.

These three areas of doctrine, and all that is implied by them (what we have said is only a sample of what could be said) cannot be lost sight of without a major portion of biblical Christianity going too. We believe these truths to be central to our position as Evangelical Anglicans, both preserving our distinctive evangelical emphases and committing us to our Church of England. Latimer House is engaged in working out the theological and practical implications of this position, and suggests that this vision could profitably be shared by all those attending the Consultation.