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Biblical Truth for Today's Church

The Latimer Trust. Registered Charity No. 1084337

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LATIMER COMMENT 9

THE GUARDIANS OF THE FAITH

Those who, over the years, have been watchers of the General Synod of the Church of England, or of the Church Assembly before it, are well aware of a remarkable phenomenon about its voting record. In any controversial matter, where a vote is taken by houses (bishops, clergy, and laity), and a two-thirds majority in each house is required, time and again one observes that it gets this majority in the House of Bishops, often by a handsome margin, even though it may fail to get it in the House of Clergy or the House of Laity or both. The laity may be cautious, or else the clergy may be, but the bishops can usually be relied on to throw caution to the winds, or at least to appear to do so. This phenomenon calls for an explanation.

Partly, no doubt, it is due to the fact that the bishops are very conscious of having a corporate responsibility. They often say so, and they act accordingly. There is a regular bishops' meeting, held in private, where matters of common concern are discussed, and the attempt is made to form an agreed policy. Sometimes, on matters of deep conscientious conviction like the ordination of women or the remarriage of the divorced, the minority evidently finds it necessary to express its dissent from the agreed policy in a public way: but those without strong views are accustomed to back the majority (and are perhaps expected to do this), so the minority always looks fairly small.

However, the deliberate formation of an agreed policy does not go very far towards providing the explanation we seek. It would only do so if the agreed policy were not always of the same sort. If it were sometimes conservative, sometimes adventurous, others in the church would feel that the bishops were judiciously assessing each question on its merits, and the lead that the bishops gave would be more readily followed. But since the agreed policy is almost invariably innovative, the clergy and laity draw the conclusion that the House of Bishops is a rather pragmatic and even a rather irresponsible body, and that if any serious theological scrutiny is to be given to new proposals, and any restraint put upon dangerous innovations, the other two houses must provide this scrutiny and this restraint themselves.

The House of Bishops, of course, is not without theologians. Indeed, quite a proportion of its members have an academic background, and could be more easily faulted on their lack of parochial experience than of theological education. So the reason why the behaviour of the House of Bishops so often looks untheological must be different, and must lie in their overriding desire to move with the times - to be 'relevant' and 'progressive'. In an age when the church has been declining in numbers, and has more older people than younger people, the bishops evidently hope in this way to awaken interest in the alienated and especially in the rising generation. Unfortunately, the sort of development which looks most like progress to those alienated from the church is likely to be progress away from Christianity and towards their own viewpoint; and, even so, their reaction at the sight of the church trying to catch up will more probably be pity than enthusiasm. A church which is different, even if this makes it odd, is more interesting than a church which is trying to be the same.

The desire for relevance may also explain the preoccupation of today's bishops, in their public utterances, with the largely secular agenda set by politicians and the mass media. The gospel is not, of course, without its bearing upon social, political and economic affairs, and it is the duty of the spokesmen of the church to point out how it bears upon them. The bishops' first duty, however, is to preach the gospel itself: only then can they apply it. If they try to put the cart before the horse, they are bound to be

misunderstood, and may very well confuse themselves. The frequency with which bishops have fallen into this trap, by confounding the absolute ideals set forth in the gospel with the variable political means for attaining those ideals, speaks for itself. In the extreme case of the present Bishop of Durham, he combines unusual confidence about political ways and means with grave uncertainty about the gospel. But political ways and means are not what bishops are commissioned (or qualified) to speak about, whereas they are commissioned to proclaim the gospel, and ought to be able to do it with conviction.

The presbyter-bishop of New Testament times had to be 'apt to teach' (1 Tim. 3:2), 'holding to the faithful word which is according to the teaching, that he may be able both to exhort in the sound doctrine, and to convict the gainsayers' (Tit. 1:9). When the separate offices of bishop and presbyter evolved, the bishop took with him all the functions of the combined office (whereas the presbyter retained some only), and so remained a teacher, but with the enhanced responsibility of being the chief teacher in his area. As Irenaeus and Tertullian in the second century saw so clearly, the bishop's role was essentially a teaching role. In the churches founded by the apostles, they pointed out, the occupants of the bishop's chair preserved and handed down the faith taught by the previous occupants of the same chair since apostolic times, and unless they were unfaithful to their trust (as in later centuries, sadly, was to happen), one could expect to find there the true apostolic message. As a result, the pretended apostolic tradition of the heretics could at that period be tested not simply by the writings of the New Testament but also by the tradition of teaching given by the bishops of apostolic sees. This is the oldest conception, on record, of the apostolic succession, and it is still alive among the Eastern Orthodox in particular.

The 'enthronement' of a bishop today should not, therefore, be thought of as the coronation of the monarch of a diocese, but as the solemn installation of the chief teacher of the historic faith at the great teaching-centre which we call his 'cathedral', i.e. the church of his cathedra or chair, where he sits and teaches. The Archbishop of York, when he was enthroned at York Minster in November 1983, preached a sermon which created high expectations, and seemed to show that he well appreciated the nature of his office. What he said about the givenness of the Christian faith, our often-faulty presentation of it, and the need to create in the nation an informed consciousness of it, was important and timely. It was good teaching, about the importance of Christian teaching, and therefore about the bishop's (and archbishop's) office. The contrast with the enthronement sermon of the Bishop of Durham, of which the most significant part was his proposals concerning the miners' strike, does not need emphasising.

It is a matter for real regret that the subsequent utterances of the Archbishop of York, and particularly those relating to the controversy over the Bishop of Durham, have not in any way fulfilled the hopes generated by his enthronement sermon. It is not sufficient to have a serious concern for the responsibility of the church in relation to the nation, if this concern is frustrated in practice by a lack of assurance and discernment about the message which he as archbishop, and the other bishops of the northern province, should be presenting to the nation for its instruction and guidance.

In the controversy about the consecration of Professor David Jenkins as Bishop of Durham, the responsibility whether to go ahead with the consecration or not, and to defend this decision, inevitably rested with the Archbishop of York. Here he was both appointing a teacher, and himself giving teaching. Obviously, he had had private discussions with the bishop designate, and so was able to make a decision with full knowledge of the facts. At the time, the general public only knew of David Jenkins's deplorable remarks on television about the virgin birth, the empty tomb and miracles in general, and of his choice of one of the most extreme negative critics among modern New Testament scholars as the preacher at his consecration, and they had to form their conclusions of that basis.

The archbishop, in his formal reply to the petition from 12, 500 people anxious about the consecration (Church Times, 6 July 1984), did not defend the remarks on television, which he conceded might have been 'unwise'. Similarly, when questioned at his press conference about the choice of preacher, he declined to comment, on the ground that the choice was not his own, but he obviously did not care to defend it. However, the archbishop did make what seemed a very reasonable point in his reply, that a man should not be judged by his unscripted remarks on television so much as by his solemn professions and his considered writings. David Jenkins was obviously willing to make the solemn professions which

the church requires, and his published Bampton Lectures The Glory of Man (1967) had been devoted to expounding his views about the person of Christ, the very matter on which his remarks caused such offence. Anyone reading The Glory of Man cannot fail to see that, though (like so much modern theology) it was very tentative, its tendency was decidedly positive. It defended the reality of the incarnation and the resurrection; and although it did not directly address itself to the questions of the virgin birth, the empty tomb or the miracles of Christ, and would no doubt have seen all sorts of difficulties in these beliefs, the author did not give the impression that he would have wanted to deny them.

Indeed, his original remarks on television did not go so far as to deny any of these truths (that was to come later). He simply cast grave doubt on some of them, The question at issue therefore was, whether a man can one day cast grave doubt on important Christian beliefs, and the next day go on to make a solemn affirmation of them? Clearly, he ought not to do this, as it invites misunderstanding; but if he does, what is one to think? According to the archbishop, one should believe his solemn affirmation; and since in David Jenkins's case it was to some extent supported by his published writings, and the Church of England is a church which acts on the principle of charitable presumption, the archbishop seemed to be in the right.

Up to this stage then, one could hardly fault the archbishop, but the rest of his reply to the petition, and his subsequent extraordinary letter to the Times (12 July 1984) about the fire at York Minster, were much more difficult to justify. His letter was admirably answered by a lady correspondent two days later, but what it said about biblical thought being out of date was a significant revelation of the archbishop's mind, as subsequent events have shown.

The second point that he made in his formal reply to the petition was that the Church of England recognises some liberty of interpretation in the assent of the clergy to the creeds. In evidence of this he referred to the 1938 report on Doctrine in the Church of England, which certainly does contain statements to this effect, and also to the 1981 report Believing in the Church and the new form of the declaration of assent, which do not.

The affirmations in the creeds that Christ was 'born of the Virgin Mary' and that he 'was buried, and the third day he rose again' can only be understood as teaching a virgin birth and a bodily resurrection. Liberty of interpretation is not therefore the real issue, for liberty of interpretation can never extend to denial. Moreover, the creeds are simple affirmations of basic Christian truths. Even the laity are expected to affirm them, and to do so at baptism and confirmation, as conditions of being recognised as Christians. How much more, then, does this apply to bishops?

With regard to the 1938 report on Doctrine, it has to be remembered, first, that it was merely the report of a commission and not an authorised statement of church belief. Its very title shows that it was descriptive rather than prescriptive. Moreover, it evoked petitions of protest, signed by over 8, 000 clergy, very similar to that evoked by David Jenkins's remarks on television.

Secondly, the decisions taken by Convocation about the report were by no means endorsements of its content. The Canterbury lower house resolved by a large majority 'that the Church of England holds and teaches the Nicene Creed in that sense only in which it has been held throughout the history of the Church, and that her ministers cannot rightly claim a liberty to set aside by private interpretation the historic meaning of those clauses which state the events of the incarnate life of our Lord Jesus Christ' (3 June 1938).

Once again, there is a marked resemblance here to the terms of the recent petition.

Thirdly, the then archbishop of York (William Temple), who was the chairman of the commission that produced the report, thought it necessary to prefix an introduction in which he emphatically expressed his own dissent from some of the views which the report included. On the three matters to which the recent remarks on television relate, Temple said that he 'would repudiate with vehemence' the idea that God would never work miracles, and that 'in view of my own responsibility in the Church I think it right here to affirm that I wholeheartedly accept as historical facts the birth of our Lord from a virgin mother and the

resurrection of his physical body from death and the tomb'.

What a difference it would have made in the recent controversy if the archbishop of York had accompanied his decision to go ahead with the consecration by some such declaration as this!

The final point which the archbishop made in his reply to the petition was that a bishop does not have a different standard of truth from other Christians. Of course not. But if, by applying that standard, he comes to conclusions at variance with basic elements of the historic Christian faith, as expressed in the creeds, should he offer himself for the episcopate? That is the real question. No-one is forced to become a bishop. And since a bishop's great role is as a teacher of the historic faith, unless he can do this with conviction, he should not accept the role.

We have said that, at the time, the archbishop's decision to go ahead with the consecration seemed defensible, in view of the contrast between David Jenkins's remarks on television and his earlier writings, of which his solemn professions in the consecration service could be considered as a reaffirmation. If David Jenkins had not repeated his remarks, and especially if he had withdrawn them, this would still hold good. But, as everybody knows, he has since repeated them over and over again, so as to put his meaning beyond all doubt, and only to call in question the meaning of his solemn professions and earlier writings.

The archbishop doubtless knew his real mind from the beginning. It would have been very irresponsible to go ahead with the consecration, in face of all the controversy, without discussing the matter thoroughly with the bishop designate. But if the archbishop did know his real mind from the beginning, it is difficult to regard as sincere the contrast which he drew between David Jenkins's 'brief, unscripted and epigrammatic' remarks on television and his solemn affirmations in church. He must have known that there was no contrast, but that the remarks on television showed the sense in which the new bishop would make the solemn affirmations.

It is therefore not altogether surprising that the controversy has not died down. Quite apart from the petition, there has been opposition in the secular and religious press, in Parliament, in the General Synod, in the University of Durham, in the diocese of Durham, in the neighbouring diocese of Newcastle (where the bishop has come out in support of David Jenkins), and more widely. An organisation has been formed named Action for Biblical Witness in our Nation, and a widely attended public meeting, under the title 'Concern for the Church of England', has been held in London. One of the bishops of the northern province, the Bishop of Chester, has been courageous enough to break the episcopal front by coming out publicly in opposition to the Bishop of Durham, and by telling his diocesan synod (10 Nov. 1984) that David Jenkins has caused 'a trail of havoc and damage in almost every congregation in Britain, derision at Christians from many non-Christians, and a torrent of letters from all over the world'.

The volume of the opposition has been striking. This is partly, no doubt, due to the Bishop of Durham's extremely provocative and abrasive way of expressing himself, and to the fact that he seems unable to keep quiet. He delights in attracting attention, as well as in shocking people. Of course, in time the media are likely to get tired of someone who is always seeking the limelight and whose utterances are always of the same sort, and as interest in his views progressively wanes, one can expect his statements to get more and more extravagant. There are few more pitiful spectacles than that of a superannuated angry young man - one who does not realise that he can no longer create a sensation, or even excite mild interest.

The volume of the opposition may, however, be due to deeper causes as well. In a remarkably penetrating contribution to The Times on 9 July 1984, entitled 'Churchmen air their doubt about liberal theology', the religious affairs correspondent raised the question whether the Church of England was not awaking from a long liberal sleep, and beginning to look critically not at orthodoxy but at its opponents. If so, David Jenkins's remarks may have fulfilled a historic role. Like some other precipitating causes in history, though of no originality or importance in themselves, they may have triggered off developments of profound importance - developments which would sweep from the public gaze both the Bishop of Durham and all who think like him.

These unwonted stirrings have put the bishops very much 'on the spot'. The outcry prompted the television programme 'Credo' to take a rough poll of the other diocesan bishops by telephone, and it concluded that a high proportion of them shared the Bishop of Durham's views. The House of Bishops angrily rejected the inaccuracy of this poll, and after their meeting on 3 Oct. 1984 issued a press statement that 'the doctrines of the Incarnation and the Resurrection are not in doubt among the leadership of our Church'. Since the Bishop of Durham himself claims to believe in the Incarnation and the Resurrection, while denying the virgin birth and the empty tomb, this statement can only be regarded as evasive, and did nothing to allay the

controversy. The matter was pursued at Question Time in the November meetings of the General Synod, when the Archbishop of Canterbury, who was clearly deeply uneasy, declined either to agree or to disagree with the Bishop of Durham. The Archbishop of York was at least more straightforward, if less orthodox, when he called a Convocation of the clergy of the northern province in mid October, and told them that all certainty in theology is impossible - that theology is 'essentially tentative, exploratory, varied'; and that therefore, presumably, anyone's view is as good as anyone else's. How one squares this with the charge given at the consecration of bishops to 'banish and drive away all erroneous and strange teaching, contrary to God's Word' (BCP), or to 'uphold the truth of the Gospel against error' (ASB), would bear investigation.

Obviously, these events are still in progress, and one can only draw interim conclusions. However, it is not too soon to make the following points :

(i) The denials made by the Bishop of Durham are no proper conclusion of modern scholarship. The Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries rightly challenged Christians to examine their faith rationally (for reason is a gift of God), but it also, wrongly, invited them to query it rationalistically (for reason is not the measure of all things). The biblical criticism that resulted has ever since been an unstable mixture of the rational and the rationalistic. It is said, for example, that the virgin birth is not in the earliest of the gospels, Mark. But Mark begins his gospel at the commencement of Jesus' ministry, not at his birth : it is not because they were written later that Matthew and Luke include the virgin birth, but because their plan is different. John, which is usually reckoned the latest of the gospels, begins, like Mark, at the commencement of Jesus' ministry. Again, however early Mark may be, it is as full of miracles as the other gospels, and the virgin birth would not be at all out of character. Yet again, Mark is quite definite about the empty tomb. Here the Bishop of Durham deserts Mark and says that he 'believes in the resurrection in the same sense as St. Paul does', i. e. without an empty tomb. But Paul is not professing to write a gospel, and though he does not assert an empty tomb he may well imply it. Clearly, then, it is not reason and scholarship which leads the Bishop of Durham and his predecessors to such conclusions, but rationalism and scepticism.

(ii) To say that one believes the Incarnation and Resurrection without believing in the virgin birth, the empty tomb or miracles, is to destroy the historical basis of Christianity. If miracles are impossible, what credibility can the gospels, with all their miracles, any longer claim? And an incarnation which does not take place through a virgin birth, or a resurrection which does not result in an empty tomb, is a mere philosophical speculation, and in fields where philosophy is entirely out of its depth. If Christianity is to retain any right to the name of a revelation, its historical basis needs to be acknowledged and emphasised, not ignored or undermined.

(iii) The policy of the House of Bishops with regard to these issues may be unrealistically timid. In their alarm at the rough 'Credo' poll, they decided not to take part in the much more scientific Gallup Poll which followed. Yet the results of this, published on 10 Dec. 1984, showed that those bishops who had already taken part before the decision was made (6 diocesan bishops and 37 suffragan or assistant bishops) were very orthodox on the matters which the Bishop of Durham denies. So were the clergy, who participated freely. It was the unfortunate ill-taught laity

who showed themselves all at sea. So, if the bishops who (like the Bishop of Chester) believe what the Bishop of Durham denies, were (like the Bishop of Chester) to speak out boldly, they would probably reveal not the spectacle of disunity which they fear, but a decidedly orthodox picture, with a few isolated

exceptions.

(iv) In any case, the policy of the House of Bishops since the appointment of Hensley Henson to the bench in 1917 has, owing to David Jenkins's outspokenness, completely broken down. What was decided then was, in effect, that a man who disbelieved the virgin birth, the empty tomb or the miraculous could only be appointed a bishop provided he kept reasonably quiet about it. Henson caused a problem because he was accused of using language intended to deny these truths, but it turned out that this was not his intention, and that he was prepared to affirm them, though with some degree of doubt. When Bishop Barnes, long after he became a bishop, denied them in his book The Rise of Christianity (1947), both archbishops publicly invited him to resign. But orthodoxy of belief has not in this century been high on the list of qualifications for the episcopal office, and the chief concern has been to avoid scandal. This may have seemed for the time a workable compromise, but, having broken down, it can now be seen to have been in reality a conspiracy of silence - of saying 'Peace! peace!' where there was no peace - and David Jenkins has unwittingly done the Church of England a service by forcing it to consider where it stands in the conflict between faith and scepticism.

(v) Above all, he forces the bishops to consider where they stand. They are the chief teachers of the church and the guardians of its faith. They could never do their work effectively by simply keeping quiet about error - error within their own midst. For to keep quiet about error is also to keep quiet about the truth which contradicts error. And that they have not been doing their work effectively is manifested by the untaught state of the laity, of which there have been other signs, but which the recent Gallup Poll has made glaringly plain. The trumpet has evidently been giving an uncertain sound, both among the bishops and among the clergy. The challenge of the present hour to the bishops and clergy is therefore to renew their faith in the gospel, and to take more seriously the responsibility of teaching it plainly, both in the church and in the nation at large.

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