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Biblical Truth for Today's Church

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LATIMER COMMENT 13

YEAR OF DECISION FOR THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND

A crisis in the life of God's backsliding people may take a long time to develop, but when it comes, a choice has to be made. After the sobering experiences of three and a half years' drought, Elijah confronted Israel with the challenge, 'How long halt ye between two opinions? If the LORD be God, follow him' (1 Kings 18:21). The church of today has, from time to time, to face a similar challenge. It is very adept at putting off the day of decision as long as possible, and resolving issues on any grounds except those of biblical revelation, but times do come when it cannot avoid this necessity any longer. 1986 looks like being such a time for the Church of England.

Over the past few years, the General Synod of England has taken temporizing decisions on a number of matters. It has authorised alternative services, now bound up in the Alternative Service Book, which are deliberately and professedly ambiguous on doctrinal issues. It has deferred sine die, and never resumed, the discussion of a report on homosexual practices, and whether they are a bar to ordination. It has approved a lax policy on divorce and remarriage, which grass-roots opinion has since forced it to modify. It has also taken such temporizing decisions on two matters which are coming up again in 1986, and this time in a more acute form.

The first of these matters is the ARCIC Final Report. Many Anglo-Catholics whom one respects approve of this report, and the Synod voted for it last year by very large majorities, maintaining that the statements on the Eucharist and the Ministry which it contained harmonized with Anglican teaching, and that the statement on Authority (though not altogether an agreed statement) was at least very promising. This year, however, it has to confirm this decision in a final way, after taking soundings in the dioceses and deaneries. The decision will then go to the 1988 Lambeth Conference, together with the decisions of the other Anglican provinces, so that a comprehensive response can be made to Rome from the whole Anglican Communion.

It is quite clear to me that the General Synod ought not to have approved the ARCIC report in the terms which it did, because it is not in agreement with Anglican teaching. The report takes an equivocal stance on the final authority of Scripture, which is one of the basic principles of the Anglican Reformation and of the 39 Articles; it carefully excludes the eucharistic teaching of Hooker, which is the most characteristic form of Anglican eucharistic theology; and it commits Anglicans to the acceptance of a modified papacy—modified in idealistic rather than realistic ways. It will therefore be very interesting to see whether the newly elected Synod takes the same decision in November this year as its predecessor did, but the superficial way the report is often being handled in the dioceses and deaneries is not an encouraging omen.

It would have been possible for the General Synod to have assessed the ARCIC report in quite other terms. It could have said, this is not Anglican theology, but a new sort of ecumenical theology: very well, we will assess it on its merits, in the light of Scripture and historic Christian theology. But for the Synod to pretend that it was Anglican theology was absurd. The Church of Rome has been much more straightforward (even if disappointing to those with high hopes): the Holy Office has said abruptly, and the national episcopal councils are now saying more politely, that the ARCIC report does not agree with Trent or Vatican I, though it moves some way in that direction; let ARCIC come the rest of the way, and all will be well! - ie. Anglicans will then have become traditional Roman Catholics. This, then, is the road which Rome is inviting ARCIC II (the new ARCIC commission) to take in its future report. If it does not, Rome will reject the work of ARCIC, and will perhaps offer Anglicans a Uniate relationship instead, i. e. a relationship under which they can continue their

present liturgies, canon law and married clergy, provided they accept the authority of the pope and Roman doctrine as a complete whole.

The other matter on which the General Synod has taken a temporizing decision in the past and has to take a more definite decision this year is the Priesthood of Women. Eleven years ago, the Synod voted that it saw 'no fundamental objections' to this, but it has always declined to take practical action. This year, however, it has to decide in July whether to agree to a small first step, by allowing women priests from abroad to minister as priests in the Church of England on a temporary basis. To do this, canon law would have to be changed, so as to recognise their presbyteral orders, and thereafter the pressure to agree to the ordination of women presbyters in England would probably be irresistible: certainly, there would be no logical consistency in refusing to allow it. Legislation to allow it is, in fact, already in preparation, but the first step of admitting the ministry of women priests from abroad is what comes before the Synod in July, and if this is refused the other and more far-reaching legislation may be dropped. It needs a two-thirds majority in each house, and at a preliminary vote in the old Synod it failed to secure this in two of the three houses; but what would be really decisive would be for it to fall short of even a simple majority (which was all that was required at the preliminary vote). Considerable efforts are being made, both by the Movement for the Ordination of Women and (in an opposite direction) by the Association for the Apostolic Ministry, to try to ensure that the July Synod does, or does not (as the case may be), agree to this first step.

If it does agree, it will bring considerably nearer the emergence of what the Bishop of London has already announced would be the likely consequence of the ordination of women, a Continuing Church of England. It is not so widely realised, however, that the same prospect will be brought much nearer by a favourable vote on the ARCIC report in November. For the more strong-minded Evangelicals have already agreed that, if the Church of England goes ahead with the ARCIC proposals, they will begin to make preparations for a Continuing Church of England; and it will be important for them to take common counsel with Anglo-Catholics to see whether it is one Continuing Church of England that they are making preparations for, or (which God forbid!) two Continuing Churches of England.

But, as if this were not enough to look forward to in 1986, there is a third matter, perhaps more explosive than either of the other two, which is the Durham crisis. At the big debate on this subject last year, the House of Bishops were asked to go away and reflect on what had been said, and to produce a report containing their proposals for meeting the situation. This has been promised in good time for it to be debated by the Synod in July. Many of the members of the new Synod gained their seats because of grass-roots concern about this issue, and if the Bishops' report should propose that the so-called 'interpretations' of the gospels and creeds advocated by the Bishop of Durham should in future be tolerated (i. e. his denials of the Virgin Birth and the Empty Tomb, which are really contradictions of the gospels and creeds, and not interpretations at all), there is reason to hope that the Synod may refuse to receive the report. The Synod will no doubt be urged not to engage in a witch-hunt, and there will be no need for it to do so: all it need demand is that no-one in future should be made bishop who has denied the Virgin Birth or the Empty Tomb, and that anyone who denies them after being made bishop should be called upon by the archbishops to resign. A general principle of this kind is what the Church of England has always acted on in the past, as the history of Bishop Hensley Henson, of Bishop Barnes and of the 1938 Doctrine report, respectively, clearly show; and a reaffirmation of this principle would be quite sufficient to wrong-foot the Bishop of Durham and his chief patron, the Archbishop of York, without any indulgence in personalities. Of course, for the credit of the House of Bishops, and particularly those of its members who still enjoy the church's respect, it is to be hoped that their report will not take a permissive line, still less pretend that nothing is changed by taking it; but one has to be prepared for all eventualities. Since this issue, more than either of the other issues we have discussed, brings into sharp relief the truth of the New Testament and the creeds, and has to be decided on the basis of an acceptance or rejection of that truth, without any plausible possibility of evasion, this promises to be the most explosive issue of the three; but each is so important, and causes such concern, that the three coming together in one year are bound to make it a traumatic year for the Church of England, and the discussions of each will react upon the other. Predictably enough, this third issue, like the other two, raises the question of schism, and those parishes in Durham and Newcastle which have already declined to have their diocesan bishop for confirmation services, could conceivably find themselves joined by parishes all over the country.

Are we much in prayer about these prospects? If not, ought we not to be?

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