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Biblical Truth for Today's Church

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LATIMER COMMENT 14

THE NATURE OF CHRISTIAN BELIEF (Church House Publishing, £1. 25)

This long-awaited report by the House of Bishops, arising out of the controversy over the utterances of the Bishop of Durham, David Jenkins, consists of two sections, a short 'Statement' and a longer 'Exposition'. There is no minority report in either section, so all members of the House (both of the archbishops, all of the diocesan bishops, and elected representatives of the suffragan bishops) commit themselves, even if a few of them do it reluctantly, to both sections.

The Statement and the Exposition alike have a decidedly positive emphasis. On the two crucial questions of the Empty Tomb and the Virgin Birth, the Statement says that 'we acknowledge and uphold (belief in) this as expressing the faith of the Church of England' (p. 2), and the Exposition defends the two beliefs vigorously against the common criticisms. The Exposition, on each point, concludes by admitting that some present members of the House of Bishops do not hold these two beliefs, but affirm the Resurrection and Incarnation in some other sense (pp. 25, 32f., paras. 50, 62); nevertheless, it adds that 'all of us accept' that the two disputed beliefs 'can be held with full intellectual integrity', and are 'the understanding of the witness of Scripture which is generally received in the universal Church' (or the only belief which 'can claim to be the teaching of the universal Church'); and that, in each case, 'this House acknowledges and upholds this belief as expressing the faith of the Church of England' (ibid).

The whole document is clear, informative and thoughtful, and for its theological quality deserves to be read and pondered by all Anglicans. The weakest part of the Exposition is the last part, on 'The Individual and Collegial Responsibility of Bishops for the Faith of the Church' (pp. 34-39); but in view of their recent history the bishops inevitably feel some embarrassment about their performance as teachers and defenders of the apostolic faith, and they do at least ask for more time in their busy schedule to devote to this essential task (p. 39, para. 78).

Presumably the House of Bishops has not produced, and committed itself to, so positive a report for merely tactical reasons, i. e. to avoid an even worse outcry than before. Rather, we must give them credit for meaning what they say, and for being a much more orthodox and believing body than some recent indications have suggested. Their report has marginalized the views of the Bishop of Durham to such an extent as to lend credence to the rumour that there was a minority of three (presumably the Bishop of Durham, the Archbishop of York and one other, perhaps the Bishop of Birmingham or the Bishop of Newcastle) who did not want the report to appear in this highly positive form, but who evidently gave way in the end. If this minority are going to distance themselves from the report after agreeing to it, in the manner of the Bishop of Durham's press release issued on its publication, they will of course make their position even more untenable than the report itself does. Their only substantial complaint has been that it was agreed to describe the Empty Tomb as 'part of the faith of the Church of England', not simply as 'the faith of the Church of England'(p. 2); but the two extra words would only have made the expression less emphatic, not altered its meaning, except on a more subtle interpretation than the minority themselves contend for.

In itself, the report does not make their position absolutely untenable. It simply causes them, as we have seen, to 'acknowledge and uphold' as 'the faith of the Church of England' and 'the teaching of the universal Church'

beliefs which they do not personally hold. In the case of the Virgin Birth, it causes them also to declare that this belief 'is explicitly affirmed in the Creeds' (p. 27, para. 51). Obviously they cannot any longer openly deny beliefs which they 'acknowledge and uphold', still less do so in the abrasive and even scurrilous terms which the Bishop of Durham has sometimes used; and one wonders how long they can go on reciting and assenting to creeds which 'explicitly affirm' what they disbelieve? In this situation, one would expect a bishop of David Jenkins's views and of David Jenkins's outspokenness to conclude before long that he ought to accept the advice of those two bishops who have publicly called upon him to resign.

A loophole is left for those who can accept the Virgin Birth 'as symbolic legend rather than history', provided they do so 'in support of belief in the Incarnation' (p. 32, para. 60). Immediately, however, questions are posed which challenge the right to use the loophole. Do not the pre-existence of Christ and his sinlessness exclude the notion that his human birth was merely a normal one, it is asked (para. 61)? The implication is that the doctrine of the Incarnation held by those who deny the historicity of the Virgin Birth may not be the orthodox doctrine of the Incarnation, and that their doctrine of Salvation may not be orthodox either. No such loophole is offered to those who deny the historicity of the Empty Tomb, since it is obvious that any doctrine of the Resurrection of Christ which has no place for the Empty Tomb will hardly be bodily resurrection, and is therefore likely to be remote from orthodox Christian belief. So it is perhaps a pity that the section of the Exposition on 'Faith and History' (pp. 12-16) suggests that there may be an orthodox approach which treats events in the Gospels not as history but as symbolic legend (p. 14f., paras. 24,25), since on both the relevant matters this proves to be a cul-de-sac. The report also says a good many reasonable things about the need to allow freedom of theological exploration in the Church (pp. 2, 10f., 14-16), but once again this leads to no conclusions that can justify denial of the Virgin Birth or Empty Tomb. The Archbishop of Canterbury, in his statement to the press conference launching the report, made a great deal of these concessions, stating that the report

does not exclude those bishops - doctrinal explorers we might call them - who agree with their colleagues over the theological meaning of the empty tomb and the virginal conception but cannot accept them as proven historical fact.

But the question is, do those bishops who deny the historicity of the Empty Tomb and the Virgin Birth really 'agree with their colleagues over the theological meaning'? Can they consistently do so? And is it not rather the case that their assertion that Christ had a human father as well as a human mother leads them into an Adoptionist or Nestorian conception of the Incarnation, according to which Christ was born merely human and originally sinful, and only afterwards became divine and sinless, by a coupling of his natural human person with a divine one? Similarly, is it not the case that their denial of the Empty Tomb leads them into a conception of Christ's Resurrection which simply amounts to a survival of his spirit? Of course, David Jenkins and his friends may not be consistent thinkers; and his views about the Incarnation were certainly more orthodox than this before the days when he started denying the Virgin Birth and Empty Tomb; but the assumption made by the archbishop that all the bishops are agreed on the Incarnation and the Resurrection, even if not on the Virgin Birth and Empty Tomb, is at least open to serious doubt. The same applies to the statement in the report that the mode of existence of the Risen Lord is among other things 'bodily', followed by the assertion 'This faith in Christ's Resurrection is the faith of every member of this House' (p. 25, para. 49f.). Really? One wonders.

At this point, therefore, the report is less clear than elsewhere. It will give rise to both a more restrictive and a less restrictive interpretation, though the more restrictive one agrees best with what the report actually says.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, as we have seen, adopted the less restrictive interpretation in his statement to the press conference, and he underlined this in his reply to a question from one of the press representatives, who asked whether those who did not accept the historicity of the Virgin Birth and the Empty Tomb would in future be eligible to become bishops, and received the answer that 'it depended how they chose to express themselves.' In other words, David Jenkins's way of expressing himself was quite unacceptable, but David Jenkins's views were not. He could hold those views in private, and he could even express them in public, provided he did it in as inoffensive a way as possible. And the same would be the case with any other bishop, or any future candidate for the episcopal office.

Since the Archbishop of Canterbury is the chairman of the Crown Appointments Commission, which selects the candidates for bishoprics, and since its vice-chairman is the Archbishop of York, who

shares David Jenkins's views, it would be easy for this interpretation to become future policy, unless the General Synod, when it debates the report in July and November, decides otherwise. And it is important that it should decide otherwise, if the report is to result in greater orthodoxy on the episcopal bench, not less. The less restrictive interpretation does not leave things where they were, it changes them for the worse. It is important to be clear about this. There have certainly been other bishops of similar views to David Jenkins, and even of less orthodox views still, but they have had to keep very quiet about it, lest it should become a public issue. In the cases where it has become a public issue, the official response has always been that such views are not acceptable. Hensley Henson in 1917 had to declare his acceptance of the historicity of the Virgin Birth, which he had apparently questioned, before his appointment as a bishop was allowed to go ahead. When the 1938 report Doctrine in the Church of England appeared, acknowledging the existence in the Church of England of clergy who did not accept the historicity of the Virgin Birth or the Empty Tomb, Archbishop Temple (the chairman of the commission responsible) prefixed a statement in which he 'repudiated with vehemence' those views, and the lower house of Canterbury Convocation resolved by a large majority that clergy had no right to interpret the creeds in that way. When Bishop Barnes in 1947 published his book The Rise of Christianity, in which he expressed the same views, though without any use of offensive language, both archbishops publicly invited him to resign. So if it were now to become the policy that bishops could both hold and express these views, provided they chose their words with care, a decided move away from orthodoxy would have been taken, and the main issue at stake in the Jenkins controversy would have been conceded. It was certainly David Jenkins's tactlessness and the offensiveness of his language which drew attention to his views, but the main point of the controversy was those views themselves, and the right of anyone who held them to be one of the chief teachers and guardians of the church's faith, i. e. a bishop. Is this right now to be conceded, as the Archbishop of Canterbury's interpretation of the report would mean?

The report was asked for by the General Synod and is addressed to the General Synod. What view the Synod takes of the report, and what resolutions it passes about its interpretation and application, is for the Synod to decide. It is certainly open to them to give more weight to the actual statements of the report than the Archbishop's interpretation does. If they decide to do this, a variety of policies lie before them for possible adoption, as alternatives to that envisaged by the Archbishop. They might resolve that any of the following should be future policy:

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- (i) That all existing bishops, and all future candidates for the office of bishop, should be asked whether they accept the historicity of the Virgin Birth and the Empty Tomb. If they refused to answer or gave a negative answer, existing bishops should be invited to resign and candidates for the office should be excluded from consideration. (This would be a more restrictive policy than practised hitherto, since such questions have not previously been asked except when a man has given grounds for his orthodoxy to be doubted).
 - (ii) That if a man's utterances suggested or proved that he did not accept the historicity of the Virgin Birth or Empty Tomb, as soon as the facts had been established the same course should be followed in his particular case as in option (i). (This is the policy practised hitherto).
 - (iii) That the course outlined in option (i) should be followed, but that those who did not accept the historicity of the Virgin Birth or Empty Tomb should be further interrogated about the orthodoxy of their doctrine of the Incarnation or Resurrection (as the case might be), and should only be invited to resign or be excluded from consideration for appointment if they proved to be unorthodox here also. Thus, they should be asked whether their doctrine of the Incarnation was that 'it is the eternally existent Second Person of the Blessed Trinity who is also the one person of the Incarnate Lord, Jesus Christ', and that he became man without sharing 'human sinfulness' (as in para. 61 of the report); and whether their doctrine of the Resurrection was that Christ's 'full human nature and identity', his 'bodily' as well as his mental and spiritual nature and identity, are present and glorified in his risen mode of

existence (as in para. 49 of the report). (The first stage of this would be more restrictive than existing practice, but the second stage much less).

- (iv) (iv) That if a particular man's utterances suggested or proved that he did not accept the historicity of the Virgin Birth or Empty Tomb, the facts should be established (as in option ii), but he should then be further interrogated about the orthodoxy of his doctrine of the Incarnation or Resurrection, and should only be invited to resign or excluded from consideration for appointment if he proved to be unorthodox here also (as in option iii). (This would be less restrictive still).
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None of these four options would be as permissive as that envisaged by the Archbishop, and any of them would be preferable. In the present parlous state of the Church of England, it is arguable that greater stringency than existing practice is needed, and that the Synod should therefore seriously consider adopting option (i). However, if on balance this seemed undesirable, option (ii), i. e. the policy followed hitherto, would have the next claim on the Synod's acceptance. To adopt it would result in certain existing bishops being invited to resign, which would be painful, even if they did not respond to the invitation (and indeed they would not be obliged to respond to it, any more than Bishop Barnes did); but it would bear unmistakable witness to the church's desire for orthodoxy in those who are the chief teachers and guardians of its faith, and it would do much to prevent future appointments adding others, who likewise fail to come up to this standard. It is, after all, a gross anomaly that our chief teachers and guardians of Christian doctrine should include people who do not hold what the report identifies as 'the faith of the Church of England' and 'the teaching of the universal Church', 'explicitly affirmed in the Creeds'; and if this anomaly is not obvious to the House of Bishops, it would be a kindness for the House of Clergy and the House of Laity to point it out.

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