



The Latimer Trust

PO Box 26685
London N14 4XQ

Chairman: The Rev'd Dr Mark Burkill
administrator@latimertrust.org
www.latimertrust.org

Biblical Truth for Today's Church

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LATIMER COMMENT 16

OKLAHOMA! A CASE STUDY IN EPISCOPAL JURISDICTION

Readers of the Church press in England were somewhat startled to learn, at the end of August 1986, that the Bishop of London, widely known for his staunch defence of traditional Anglo Catholicism, had taken the apparently un-Catholic step of "adopting" the parish of St Michael, Tulsa, and accepting its incumbent, the Reverend John Pasco, as a priest in good standing of the Church of God, after he had been deposed by the canonical courts of the Episcopal Church in the USA.

At the time of writing, the facts in the original dispute between Mr. Pasco and his diocesan remain somewhat obscure, and it is probable that the Bishop of London's decision will soon eclipse them entirely, if that has not already happened. According to Mr. Pasco's own testimony (Church Times, 26 September 1986) the question of the ordination of women, including their possible consecration as bishops, was not at issue in his expulsion from the Episcopal Church, though the involvement of the Bishop of London and Mr. Pasco's own remarks in his letter to the Church Times make it likely that that issue lies near the surface of the dispute. It appears that Mr. Pasco's "traditional" views put him at loggerheads with the Church authorities, and that events quickly snowballed from there.

Precedents ?

Before going on to consider the propriety of the Bishop of London's action, it is as well to remember that a case analogous to that of Mr. Pasco is scarcely conceivable in the Church of England, where checks and balances built into the system ensure that no parish priest is likely to be deposed, however much he may disagree with his diocesan bishop, unless he has committed some gross misdemeanour. As no-one has accused Mr. Pasco of this, it is reasonable to assume that had he been a parish priest in England, the situation which has occurred in Tulsa would have been practically impossible. Other churches of the Anglican Communion, which lack the safeguards of the Church of England, are more prone to disciplinary action of this kind, and the Episcopal Church in the USA, given its recent dissensions over liturgical reform and ordination, is perhaps more prone to them than most. Certainly it is true that the Bishop of London has claimed that Mr. Pasco was not given fair treatment by the Episcopal Church authorities, and from an English point of view at least, this is a perfectly understandable reaction.

The Bishop's decision to counteract what he regards as an injustice raises other issues, which are potentially of much greater significance for the Anglican Communion, and may eventually spill over into the internal life of the Church of England. It has been pointed out by the Reverend John Salter (Church Times, 19 September 1986) that the Bishops of London have traditionally assumed responsibility for Anglicans overseas who have not had recourse to a local bishop, and he also mentions that other Anglican bishops have taken similar action in the past, citing as examples Lord Plunkett's recognition of the Spanish and Lusitanian (Portuguese) Episcopal Churches and the Archbishop of Sydney's recognition of the Church of England in South Africa. To these could conceivably be added the ancient case of the Scottish peculiars in Glasgow and Edinburgh, which until recently were under the jurisdiction of English bishops and canon law, even though they were on Scottish Episcopal territory. There is also the overlapping jurisdiction in Europe, where the Church of England and the Episcopal Church both have an extraterritorial diocesan structure within which it would presumably be possible for a congregation to move from one to the other if a situation analogous to that of St Michael's, Tulsa were ever to develop.

However, this rather impressive list of "precedents" becomes more doubtful when we remember that Tulsa has never lain in an overlapping jurisdiction, that the Church from which St Michael's was expelled was (and is) in communion with the Church of England - something which was clearly never true in the Iberian Peninsula - and that the metropolitan Church of England has never had or claimed even residual responsibility for Oklahoma (which sets the case apart from that of South Africa). It is therefore fair to say that we are faced with a new situation for which adequate precedent does not really exist, in spite of claims to the contrary.

What is a "Bishop in the Church of God"?

The Bishop of London's claim to extraterritorial jurisdiction rests on two major pillars. First of all, there is the request from the priest and parish concerned, that he act on their behalf. Whatever, else may be said about his action, the Bishop is clearly not meddling in the affair without an invitation to do so. Second, the Bishop claims that as a bishop in the "Church of God" he has both a right and a duty to act whenever and wherever he may be required to do so. This claim appears to go against the Ordinal for the Consecration of Bishops, where it is made quite clear that a diocesan must swear an oath of obedience to his archbishop, to whom he is accountable under God for the affairs of his own diocese. There is certainly no licence given to him to act outside this, and no English bishop would interfere in the affairs of another diocese in this country, unless he happens to be the Patron of a living in that diocese or is acting in some capacity other than his episcopal one.

However, the Ordinal also says that it is a Bishop's duty to be ready "... with all faithful diligence, to banish and drive away all erroneous and strange doctrine contrary to God's Word - and both privately and openly to call upon and encourage others to do the same." On the supposition that within his own diocese he would be able to do more than merely exhort others in this way, it is perhaps reasonable to assume that the Ordinal allows such activity beyond the boundaries of a bishop's own diocese and Church. Good manners might ordinarily dictate non-interference in the internal affairs of a sister Church with whom the bishop is in communion, but in extraordinary circumstances he might feel conscience-bound to ignore politeness and exercise this particular pastoral responsibility. This is the real heart of the matter, and raises a more fundamental issue: is the Episcopal Church in the USA really in communion with the Church of England? The ordination of women in that Church (as elsewhere) brought into question the unity of Holy Orders which had previously united our two Churches, if only because no ordained woman of the Episcopal Church will be permitted to officiate in England. (It is true that all clergy from overseas must be licensed to officiate in this country, but such permission is normally granted to a man; it is not granted to a woman on the ground that her ordination is inconsistent with the canons of our Church). From an Anglo-Catholic point of view, disunity at the level of ministry calls into question the validity of the sacramental ministry of the other Church, and therefore also of its ultimate doctrinal unity with the Church of England. The Bishop of London is saying, without openly claiming to do so, that the Episcopal Church (and other Anglican Churches which have ordained women) has put itself out of unity with the Anglican Communion as a whole, so that it may be permissible to regard the USA as a country in which there is no legitimate Anglican jurisdiction. So far, this is more an implied suggestion on the Bishop of London's part than an outright assertion, and he may yet hesitate to press his case. But it is certainly the direction in which he is logically moving, and Evangelicals in the Church of England need to watch developments in Oklahoma with great care. It may yet be that if the Church of England were to ordain women at some point in the future, bishops who could not accept the move as consonant with Catholic order will cite the present Bishop of London's action as precedent for acting outside their own dioceses, thereby splitting the Church of England along party, rather than territorial lines, and leaving Evangelicals with little option but to choose one side or the other in a debate which many may feel does not touch the heart of their own concerns.

Evangelicals will want to discern whether the Bishop of London (and whoever takes up his mantle) is upholding the authority of Scripture, the truth of the creeds, salvation through faith, basic Christian morality and edifying worship, as well as the traditional pattern of the ordained ministry: if he is, then, when any split occurs, they will know on which side they stand.