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Biblical Truth for Today's Church

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LATIMER COMMENT 17

C.S.LEWIS, 20 YEARS ON

C.S. Lewis died in 1963, but he continues to attract admirers, both in Britain and America, and indeed all over the English-speaking world. A big new biography by an American, William Griffin, has just appeared from Harper and Row of San Francisco. It is a discursive book, based on Lewis's own sayings and letters, but certain themes appear frequently enough to stand out. Here are some specimens:

'I'm not what you call high. To me the real distinction is not high and low, but between religion with a real supernaturalism and salvationism on the one hand and all watered-down modernist versions on the other' (p. 166).

'When Blamires mentioned high church and low church, Lewis said he preferred the term "deep churchman". "I think the Anglo-Catholics are the only Evangelicals left", offered Blamires. "Oh no", said Lewis with a twinkle, "there are still just a few of us here and there"' (p. 351f.).

'No, I'm afraid I'm not even an Anglo-Catholic, I'm a Protestant' (p. 415).

'I'm not a fundamentalist in the direct sense : one who starts out by saying, "Everything we read is literal fact". But I often agree with the fundamentalists about particular passages whose literal truth is rejected by many moderns. I reject nothing on the grounds of its being miraculous. I accept the story of the fall, and I don't see what the findings of the scientists can say either for or against it' (p. 364).

'If the Anglican theologians abandoned the miraculous, he would be forced to leave the Anglican Church and look for a church that still held the miraculous; he would, in fact, have to become a Roman Catholic'(p. 402f.).

'I hope I shall not forfeit the good will or the prayers of either (Roman Catholics or Fundamentalists). Nor do I much fear it. In my experience the bitterest opposition comes neither from them nor from any other thorough-going believers, and not often from the atheists, but from semi-believers of all complexions. There are some enlightened and progressive old gentlemen of this sort whom no courtesy can propitiate and no modesty disarm'(p. 390).

Anglo-Catholics think of Lewis as an Anglo-Catholic, and Evangelicals think of him as an Evangelical. There are grounds for both opinions. The parish church of Headington Quarry where Lewis worshipped is an Anglo-Catholic church, where the Prayer Book is used with Anglo-Catholic ceremonial. Lewis also shared in some of the devotional practices of Anglo-Catholicism, such as private confession. He sympathised with the Anglo-Catholics because they shared his belief in a supernatural religion of divine salvation, and he took these external practices in his stride. He even extended his sympathy to Roman Catholics, as the above passages show. But he did not agree with Anglo-Catholics in everything, and, being an exceptionally clear thinker, he was well aware of the fact. For the above passages also show that he denied that he was an Anglo-Catholic, was prepared to be classed as an Evangelical, and deliberately described himself as a 'Protestant'. He even had sympathy with 'fundamentalists', by which he evidently means naive literalists. The only group he had no sympathy with is those he describes as 'semi-believers' and 'modernists', the people who reject miracles and deny supernatural salvation.

The wisdom of Lewis's attitude is more apparent today than it perhaps was in his lifetime. He did not desire either Evangelicals or Anglo-Catholics to compromise their convictions, but he did desire them to come to terms - to lay aside their jealous rivalry in face of a common enemy, to behave with moderation, and if possible to sort out their differences. Instead, the jealous rivalry has continued, especially in Church Assembly and its successor the General Synod, where there has been only occasional co-operation between Anglo-Catholics and Evangelicals, and much more frequently an attempt by one group to vote down the other. The bare majorities given by the House of Laity to the resolutions in favour of the ARCIC report in November 1986 are a case in point. Anglo-Catholics, as the moving spirits behind ARCIC, were desperate for these motions to succeed, and they did - just. The result was a technical victory for them, but an actual defeat. The writing is now on the wall for ARCIC. When one sees how concerned Lewis was to warn Anglo-Catholics not to try to shift Anglican doctrine in a Roman direction on even a single matter (the veneration of saints), for fear they would split the church, (p. 334f.), it is obvious what he would have thought of the manifold shifts attempted in the ARCIC report. Better relations between Anglicans and Roman Catholics are not helped by trying to change Anglicanism into Roman Catholicism, or to disguise Roman Catholicism as Anglicanism.

The rivalry between Evangelicals and Anglo-Catholics has had the further effect, of allowing Liberalism to make considerable headway at the expense of both groups - witness the character of the Alternative Service Book (a very Liberal sort of Anglo-Catholicism, with a few sops to Evangelicals), and the frequency of vague compromise-motions, such as the one resorted to in November 1986, when the report on The Priesthood of the Ordained Ministry was being debated.

But how could the Evangelicals and Anglo-Catholics come to terms? One might suggest the following as a basis for discussion :

First, Anglo-Catholics would need to acknowledge, much more frankly than they have often done, that the Church of England is one of the churches of the Reformation, and took its present form in the sixteenth century, when (as that old-fashioned high church bishop Christopher Wordsworth declared) it 'became Protestant, that it might be more truly Catholic'.

Evangelicals, for their part, would need to acknowledge that the Church of England did not come into existence in the sixteenth century, and that those features of the pre-Reformation church which the Reformers deliberately retained, as edifying and in harmony with Scripture, could not now be altered except with the full agreement of all parties in the church.

Secondly, since the Church of England is one of the churches of the Reformation, Anglo-Catholics would need to acknowledge that its Reformation formularies, the 39 Articles and the Book of Common Prayer, should be treated by Anglo-Catholics with proper respect, as the Articles for some time, and more recently the Prayer Book as well, have often not been.

Conversely, since the Church of England did not begin in the sixteenth century, Evangelicals would need to acknowledge that liturgical worship, the threefold ministry, infant baptism and the establishment are among those features of the pre-Reformation church which the Reformers deliberately maintained, as edifying and in harmony with Scripture; and that any Evangelicals who have ceased to regard them as such should acknowledge that their convictions are no longer Anglican, and should consequently no longer expect to hold office in the Church of England.

Thirdly, since the main principles of the Reformation (expressed in the Articles, the Prayer Book or both) are the supremacy of Scripture, the completeness of Christ's work of atonement at Calvary, and justification through faith, Anglo-Catholics would need to acknowledge the importance of respecting and proclaiming these truths in their teaching and practice, and of insisting on them, not playing them down, in ecumenical negotiations with the Church of Rome and Eastern Orthodoxy.

Conversely, Evangelicals would need to acknowledge that the break between Canterbury and Rome, and between Western and Eastern Christendom, are the widest and most calamitous breaches in the Christian world that affect Anglicans, and are therefore the most important to be bridged (if this is possible), though certainly not the most straight-forward .

Fourthly, since Scripture is supreme in authority over both tradition and the church, Anglo-Catholics would need to concede (with Articles 19 and 21) that the church can err, and sometimes has erred, that reformation of itself by Scripture is one of the church's important duties, and that the refusal of the Church of Rome to recognise this is one of the greatest obstacles to ecumenical progress.

Conversely, since the church (subject only to the authority of Scripture) has 'power to decree rites and ceremonies, and authority in controversies of faith' (Article 20), Evangelicals would need to concede that they have often treated the time-honoured regulations and decisions of the church (however faithful to

Scripture) with scant respect.

Fifthly, as regards the ministry, since the Edwardian and Elizabethan Reformers are known to have held that ministers should be called 'priest' only as a short form of 'presbyter', Anglo-Catholics would need to acknowledge that this is in all probability what the Prayer Book means by the term, and that it does not imply any sacrificial function.

Conversely, Evangelicals would need to acknowledge that the Reformers deliberately maintained the rule that Holy Communion should be celebrated by bishops or presbyters alone, and did not make any evident change in the rule that they alone should pronounce absolution. Consequently, no change should be made in these rules now, except with the full agreement of all parties in the church. Much the same applies to the rule that bishops and presbyters should be male, though in this case the rule can claim support from Scripture as well as from tradition, and there are Evangelicals as well as Anglo-Catholics concerned that it should be maintained.

Sixthly, as regards the sacraments, Anglo-Catholics would need to acknowledge the emphasis laid by the Prayer Book and Articles on the spiritual character of sacramental grace, and on the crucial role of faith if it is to be received.

Conversely, Evangelicals would need to acknowledge that the sacraments are not marginal to Christianity but are 'generally necessary to salvation' (Catechism), and that they are objective means of grace in which the role of faith is to receive God's grace, not to create it, and which bring judgment if they do not bring blessing (Article 25).

Seventhly, as regards the ministry of the word, Anglo-Catholics would need to acknowledge that the Prayer Book and Articles do not put this in second place to the sacraments as a means of grace, but insist on the importance of both, and that consequently the serious exposition of Scripture in sermons should have a prominent place in parochial ministry.

Conversely, Evangelicals would need to acknowledge that the daily reading of the Scriptures in Morning and Evening Prayer by the clergy is the rule of the Church of England, and is not to be interrupted (much less discontinued) without weighty cause.

Eighthly, as regards ceremonial, Anglo-Catholics would need to acknowledge that, since ceremony expresses doctrine, the copying of ceremonial from the Church of Rome, before the doctrinal issues dividing Canterbury and Rome have been solved, is irresponsible and misleading unless it is done with great discrimination.

Conversely, Evangelicals would need to acknowledge that ceremonial is a secondary matter (Article 34), and that to add to the ceremonial of the Church of England in a discriminating and restrained way, even from Roman sources, could be edifying, provided the ceremonial of the Church of England was not itself displaced.

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