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Biblical Truth for Today's Church

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LATIMER COMMENT 18

ANNUS MIRABILIS 1986

Latimer Memoranda nos. 10 and 13, entitled 'Sunday Trade : a Christian Perspective' and 'Year of Decision for the Church of England', anticipated a very important decision by Parliament and no less than three very important decisions by the General Synod in 1986. Wrong decisions looked very possible, and could have been calamitous. All these decisions have now been taken, at least in principle, and one looks back in wonder and thankfulness at the providential deliverances which took place.

There was first of all the matter of Sunday trade. The Government, supported by the newspapers, was making a determined bid to remove all restrictions on the opening of shops on Sundays. Their bill included a lifting of all restrictions on shop-opening hours on weekdays, and the Government had let it be known that, as soon as this was achieved, licensing hours for public houses would be abolished as well. Despite an unparalleled unanimity in the Christian churches opposing the removal of restrictions on Sunday shop-opening, the opposition of the Shop Workers' Union and the Chambers of Trade, and meetings in the constituencies up and down the country opposing it, the Government pressed on and attempted to force the legislation through by the use of its large parliamentary majority and a three-line whip, overriding the consciences and rational objections of members. The bill passed in the House of Lords, though with a large minority against, and came to the House of Commons on 14th April. Against all the predictions, it was there defeated. In defiance of the whips, 72 Government supporters voted against it and another 15 to 20 abstained. This would have made the voting for and against exactly even, and the Speaker would have had to exercise his casting vote in favour of the Government; but the 14 Ulster Unionists, who had been boycotting Parliament since the Ulster Agreement, suspended their boycott just to come and vote against this bill. So it was defeated by 14 votes. It is said that only once before in the last sixty years has a Government bill been defeated on its second reading, and a dangerous situation for the Government might well have resulted, had not the Libyan crisis followed on the very same day.

Why the Government has taken this attitude is interesting to speculate, but its contempt for the opinion of the churches is clear for all to see, and is a salutary warning of the low esteem into which they have fallen (largely by their own fault, probably) in parliamentary circles. Unabashed by its defeat, the Government is now said to be reviving its attempts to promote Sunday trade (The Times, Nov. 18), though as yet only in a limited way.

In July, two controversial issues came before the General Synod. One was the ordination of women to the priesthood (presbyterate). This is a matter on which Evangelicals are somewhat divided (not surprisingly, since the Bible gives no explicit command on the matter, only strong indications), though Anglo-Catholics are more or less unanimously opposed. The matter came up in July in the shape of the Women Priests Ordained Abroad Measure, which would have allowed such women priests to minister in the Church of England on visits, and would undoubtedly have formed the thin end of the wedge for more far-reaching legislation. The measure needed a two-thirds majority in each of the three houses, and obtained it (though without a great deal to spare) in the House of Bishops, but not in the House of Clergy or House of Laity. It was thus defeated, and made the prospects for legislation allowing women presbyters to be ordained in the Church of England itself look very bleak. The House of Bishops has to report on this question during 1987, and one of the issues it will have to take account of is the Mc Clean committee report (GS 738), also

submitted to the Synod in July, which points out what difficult jurisdictional and financial provisions would have to be made when the ordination of women was introduced here, if it was not to cause the controversy, division and injustice that it has caused in North America.

The other issue that came before the Synod in July was the latest round of the Durham crisis, in the form of the House of Bishops report The Nature of Christian Belief. The content of this report is analysed in Latimer Memoranda no. 14, and need not be further analysed here. Suffice it to say that its positive teaching on the Virgin Birth, the Empty Tomb and related issues is most encouraging, and that it is mainly the loopholes which it desires to make for bishops who do not accept these truths that give cause for concern. The debate on the report in July was confused, but at the November sessions the House of Clergy and House of Laity opted to meet separately, in the absence of bishops. They then proceeded to pass by a large majority motions affirming the Virgin Birth and the Empty Tomb, and telling the House of Bishops, in effect, that the loopholes they asked for could not be conceded. What happens next remains to be seen, but these votes were undoubtedly a very positive development.

The third matter before the General Synod in 1986 was ARCIC, since the Final Report of the ARCIC I commission was due in November for a confirmatory vote, having earlier been accepted by very large majorities. At the separate session of the House of Laity in November, however, they subjected the report to a much closer scrutiny than before, and declined to give any of the three statements it contains a two-thirds majority. (At the joint-debate with the other two houses which followed, they did give a two-thirds majority to one of the three statements, but still not to the other two.) The report did not need a two-thirds majority on this occasion, and so was passed, but before it could be implemented, it undoubtedly would need two thirds, so this is a clear warning-shot across the bows. When one recalls that, at the final vote on the Anglican-Methodist scheme, a two-thirds majority in each house and a three-quarters majority overall was required, one can see that the House of Laity was displaying warning lights which will need to be taken very seriously by those who want the ARCIC negotiations to succeed. Either a more realistic approach to the disagreements between Canterbury and Rome will need to be taken by ARCIC II, even at the expense of increasing the resistance on the Roman Catholic side, or the whole scheme seems likely to grind to a halt. Since ARCIC II has just published a statement on the controversial subject of Justification, it is now possible to judge whether this greater realism has yet made an appearance or not. Perhaps it is beginning to do so.

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