

The Anglican Understanding of Church

Churchman 115/3 2001

Donald Allister

‘The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men....’¹

So Article XIX begins, inadvertently offering a hostage to fortune. That hostage has been well and truly taken by today’s evangelicals, even by many who would call themselves conservative, classical or reformed and therefore ought to know better. And continuing to hold such a hostage makes us look foolish, as indeed we are. The sixteenth century reformers who framed this Article did not mean that it is only the local congregation which may properly be called the church. The very next paragraph speaks of ‘the Church of Rome’, clearly meaning what we would call a huge international denomination but content to use the word ‘church’ to describe it. The tendency among Anglican evangelicals today to understand church as including the local congregation but excluding diocese, province or national church is not the whole truth, is not the best way of understanding the biblical or the historical evidence, is not authentically Anglican.

This may be uncomfortable for us, but we need to face it. There has always been a bias towards congregational independency among the less doctrinal evangelicals, those whose roots are deep in revival ground but shallow in the soils of reformation theology. In recent years that bias has been taught by some of our friends, themselves heavily influenced by an evangelistically strong but ecclesiological weak movement emanating from beyond these shores. It has been received with open arms by good leaders and good churches who are understandably frustrated by the shortage of reformed leadership at the national level of the Church of England, or by the willingness of today’s liberals to throw out biblical morality as well as orthodox doctrine. Some of us who gladly bear the stigma of labels such as conservative, classical or reformed have been seduced by this plausible teaching, this natural but superficial reading of the Articles. We have been ready to deny the diocese any more status than that of a para-church agency. We have been eager to sideline the General Synod and the House of Bishops as simply talking-shops with no right to speak or legislate for us, no authority over us. We need today to repent of those attitudes, however much we respect those who have taught them and however much we abhor the errors against which they are an over-reaction.

Even those of us who do not go as far as independency may well have fallen for a half-way position best characterised as connexionalism: the teaching that each church lives in connection with others, to some extent mutually accountable, but with no formal hierarchy or authority structures. On this basis the diocese or denomination provides a framework (though not necessarily the only one) for such connections, but it has no control over the local church except to the extent permitted by that local church. This model is closer to historic Anglicanism than the congregational model. But it is not fully biblical, and it is not what our Anglican formularies teach.

True Anglicanism is neither fully congregational, though it gives great importance to the congregation, nor solely connexional, though it requires local churches to relate to each other.

It is (wait for the evangelical hate-words) episcopal and hierarchical. Here are two obvious examples of this from the Prayer Book. First, the ordination service makes plain that the local minister is not a law to himself as regards his ministry, but comes under the authority of his bishop and of others in the hierarchy:

Will you reverently obey your Ordinary,² and other chief Ministers, unto whom is committed the charge and government over you; following with a glad mind and will their godly admonitions, and submitting yourselves to their godly judgements?³

Given this promise which we clergy have made, it is hard to justify our objections to the bishop's words at an institution: 'Receive this charge which is both yours and mine.' But evangelicals do feel uncomfortable with those words: I think because we are not being consistent in keeping our ordination vows or in applying the Prayer Book's doctrine of church and ministry. Second, the communion service makes plain that the local church is not a law to itself as regards discipline:

If a Minister be persuaded that any person who presents himself to be a partaker of the holy Communion ought not to be admitted thereunto...he shall give an account of the same to the Ordinary of the place, and therein obey his order and direction.⁴

Note well that the minister is not to make the decision himself, or to refer it to his wardens or leadership team. The bishop does have a role as superintendent pastor of the local church. Now it may be true (in my case it is) that we have chosen to ignore promises and rules such as these, or perhaps to sit loose to them by special pleading, but we cannot deny that they are there in black and white and that we as Anglican clergy have willingly committed ourselves to be bound by them. If we take seriously these and numerous other examples to be found in our defining formularies we must conclude that episcopacy and hierarchy are a necessary part of the Anglican understanding of church. Once again, it's time to repent.

The usage of the Thirty-nine Articles precisely matches that of Scripture: the church can be understood as either local or universal, either visible or invisible: but these distinctions are not identical to each other. The local church is not the only form of the visible, despite what congregationalists might like to think; and the universal church is not the same as the invisible, regardless of any claims to the contrary by Rome. The Bible and the Articles make most sense when we see that the local/universal and the visible/invisible distinctions are not always hard-and-fast, but must be treated flexibly. At times it may be appropriate to warn a diocese or a denomination that it is not speaking for its members or for its Lord; on occasions it may be right to remind a diocese or a denomination that some of its functions are more those of a para-church organisation than of a normal church: but the Bible and the Articles clearly allow and encourage us to speak of the diocese or the denomination (or incidentally the team parish or the ecumenical group) as themselves being churches.

It seems that we sometimes want to define the church more tightly than do Scripture and Anglican tradition – or rather, we don't fully understand or hold to that doctrine of the church which is clearly taught in both Bible and Prayer Book. In Scripture 'church' can refer to all the churches of a geographical area, so Acts 9:31: *Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord.* Here 'the church', and the singular pronouns and verbs, are used to describe what some of us would prefer to call 'the churches'.⁵

Similarly Article XX tells us that ‘The Church hath power to decree Rites and Ceremonies...’ which in its historical context can only mean the Church of England, insisting on its independence from Rome. It would be ludicrous to argue that the Articles envisage the errant Roman Church as simply one congregation, or that they intend to empower every congregation to determine its own liturgy regardless of the wider body. Precisely that latter construction is often put on things by evangelicals today, but we simply cannot claim such behaviour as genuinely Anglican.

Our proper Anglican belief that the church must always be open to further scriptural reformation does not allow us to restrict our understanding of church to what is taught in the Prayer Book, Articles and Ordinal. There will sometimes be new perspectives discovered in the Bible which change the way we see or do things. Similarly the changing culture in which we live and the evolving language which we use mean that sometimes eternal truths need to be expressed differently. But surely historic Anglicanism must mean that we will not choose to go against the Prayer Book, the Articles and the Ordinal – or that if we find ourselves doing so we will be honest enough to recognise that we can no longer call ourselves Anglican.

This does not prohibit us from disagreeing with our leaders or with the majority in the church. Indeed we have a duty to play our full part in the decision-making process, and I suggest that more senior clergy need regularly to remind bishops that they are still presbyters too, in the same way that more senior lay people need to remind clergy that they remain part of the *laos*. We will be prepared for the sometimes tedious work of diocesan committees, and where possible even to serve on the bishop’s council or the general synod. We will be ready to say our piece, to be in a minority of one where necessary, to argue our case: sometimes to win, sometimes to lose, but always eventually to submit to the authority of those over us in the Lord. In the Church of England we are given remarkable freedom of thought and action. We should be grateful for that and take full advantage of it, but not misuse it. Bible people are, in the last analysis, obedient rather than rebellious.

Sometimes, particularly with reference to discipline within the church, evangelicals suggest that our formularies need to be tightened up. This is nothing new. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Puritanism spanned the Church of England and the dissenting churches. Puritans tended to argue that our Article XIX was an incomplete definition of church, including word and sacraments but making no mention of discipline. We cannot avoid this subject: in his earthly life the Lord Jesus made very few references to the church after his ascension, but he did speak about its disciplinary role – or more accurately the disciplinary element of its discipling role. Matthew 18:15-22 is the most obvious example but there are others, too, such as John 20:23 and possibly Matthew 16:18-19. Discipline must be part of the life of the church.

But perhaps we are too quick to argue that Article XIX is incomplete as regards discipline. The Articles make no claim to be a systematic theology; they are, rather, a major contribution to many of the debates of their own time. Again and again we find them treading a *via media*, not between Rome and Geneva as Bicknell⁶ argues and so many still believe, but standing with sixteenth century Geneva and Strasbourg between the excesses of Rome and those of extreme or radical protestantism. Seen today as firmly against medieval catholic error but equally firmly against independency and charismatic restorationism they make great biblical sense. But (like this paper which attempts mainly to speak to some of today’s issues) they are

not exhaustive. (There is a much more exhaustive and systematic theology, written largely by Anglicans for Anglicans, in the Westminster Confessions: don't forget that the great Westminster Assembly of 1643-6 was called by the English Parliament to set standards and resolve differences. Today's Presbyterians look to it as theirs, but it is just as much ours.) However even though Article XIX does not speak directly of discipline, other parts of our official formularies make plain that its insistence on word and sacraments can only be understood within a disciplinary framework. Look no further than Article XXIII:

It is not lawful for any man to take upon himself the office of publick preaching, or ministering the Sacraments in the Congregation, before he be lawfully called, and sent ... ,

or Article XXVI:

It appertaineth to the discipline of the Church, that inquiry be made of evil Ministers, and that they be accused by those that have knowledge of their offences; and finally being found guilty, by just judgement be deposed

or the prefatory rubric to the Prayer Book's service of Holy Communion which, as we have already seen, spells out procedures for excommunication. Our formularies are perfectly clear about the necessity of discipline for ministers and for lay people.

More often we hear the argument that in practice the exercise of discipline is weak or non-existent. Of course there are difficulties here, and General Synod is currently attempting to deal with some of them. But surely we all know of ministers who have been disciplined for immorality or unbelief, and it is less than ten years since a diocesan bishop resigned following revelations of impropriety. To say that discipline is not exercised is patently untrue; there are problems, and some overhaul of the system is needed, but that overhaul is also underway.

Discipline may be a problem area, but the main themes of the Anglican understanding of church are clear and strong. The Articles point to the coming together of believers to hear the word preached and to partake of the sacraments. They insist on details of faith and order: certain things to be believed, certain practices to be followed. They allow the church freedom 'to decree Rites and Ceremonies, and authority in Controversies of Faith', but limit that freedom so that nothing may be taught or demanded 'that is contrary to God's Word written'.⁷

The Creeds (just as much part of our defining documents as the Articles) remind us that the church is 'one, holy, catholic and apostolic'.⁸

We have here eight great themes each worth a paper in its own right and together describing the Anglican understanding of church: preaching the word, observing the sacraments, holding the faith, maintaining the order, working for unity, striving for holiness, rejoicing in catholicity, confident in apostolicity.

But this is not all. If I understand the structure of both Apostles' and Nicene Creeds aright, the doctrine of the church is not a fourth paragraph following three for the persons of the Trinity: it is a subheading under the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. So the whole great subject of the Spirit at work in history and today (through word, sacraments, faith, order, unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity) needs to be opened up. Think yet again of the Creeds,

and those other glorious themes which I take to be sub-sub headings under the doctrine of the church: 'The Communion of Saints; The Forgiveness of sins; The Resurrection of the body, And the life everlasting' in the Apostles' Creed, and in the Nicene: 'One Baptism for the remission of sins...the Resurrection of the dead, And the life of the world to come.' All this should be part of our understanding of church.

Am I going too far here? Look at it this way: the Prayer Book gives us in the General Thanksgiving that marvellous phrase 'the means of grace'. If we think through those ways in which God chooses to save, bless and glorify his people, we find that they all come to us through the church – preaching, sacraments, prayer, fellowship, discipline and so on. Sadly these days a low ecclesiology is common among evangelicals, allowing an individualistic and privatised spirituality. Two examples will suffice: our attitudes to preaching and to prayer. Reformed theology has always followed Scripture in giving preaching the primacy among the means of grace. The tendency today is to exalt even higher the private reading and study of the Bible. But this is only fully available to the educated, and implicitly at least it allows a solitary walk with God which is quite alien to the New Testament and the Prayer Book. So we produce a church where only confident readers (themselves a subset of the verbally confident) can feel fully involved, yet paradoxically where those most able to teach or to lead have little incentive to do so because they are taught to hear God in private. Dare we argue this next point? Yes we dare because we must. 2 Timothy 3:16-17, that great evangelical shibboleth text, is not referring to Scripture as something which all must read in order to be useful for God, but as something which preachers must handle aright if they are to be useful in applying God's word to people's lives. Read these verses in the light of 2 Timothy 4:1-5 if you are in any doubt. The 'man of God' of verse 17 is the minister or preacher rather than the believer.⁹

So these verses are a charter for preaching as a means of grace, not a burden on those believers who find reading difficult. By all means let us encourage Bible reading, but never in such a way as to replace preaching as God's chosen means of salvation. Prayer, too, is nowadays among evangelicals primarily a private exercise, but one of the many glories of Anglicanism is its emphasis on liturgical corporate prayer. I cannot remember which of the Puritans it was who said that if you have to choose between private prayer and the public gathering of God's people you should unhesitatingly choose the latter: but I know he was right. We must not allow private prayer, or the individualistic prayer of many prayer meetings, to supplant this. Augustine said that Ambrose of Milan was the first person to pray without moving his lips: was this perhaps the beginning of privatised spirituality? The Bible (please re-read Ephesians if you are in any doubt of this) and the Prayer Book teach us a high doctrine of the church, within whose embrace God's people as a body together receive all the means of grace.

Every now and then I put to Anglican evangelicals Calvin's teaching about the church as the mother of believers. The response is rarely positive. Thus I have some sympathy for former Archbishop Runcie's plea to Anglican evangelicals to work out our ecclesiology. Of course in a sense Runcie was wrong because we already have an ecclesiology in the Bible, the Prayer Book and Articles and in the other reformed teachers we value so highly. We have an ecclesiology, but we do not know it or believe it. Calvin was not an Anglican, though Cranmer and others learned much from him, and perhaps both learned much from Bucer. We accept nowadays that Cranmer's doctrine of the sacraments was pure Calvin; it is time that we saw the same truth about his doctrine of the church.¹⁰

In case it is not fresh in your minds, let me quote just one paragraph: Calvin's *Institutes*, Book 4 chapter 1 section 4.¹¹

But because it is now our intention to discuss the visible church, let us learn even from the simple title 'mother' how useful, indeed how necessary, it is that we should know her.¹² For there is no other way to enter into life unless this mother conceive us in her womb, give us birth, nourish us at her breast, and lastly, unless she keep us under her care and guidance until, putting off mortal flesh, we become like the angels (Matt. 22:30). Our weakness does not allow us to be dismissed from her school until we have been pupils all our lives. Furthermore, away from her bosom one cannot hope for any forgiveness of sins or any salvation, as Isaiah (Isa. 37:32) and Joel (Joel 2:32) testify. Ezekiel agrees with them when he declares that those whom God rejects from heavenly life will not be enrolled among God's people (Ezek. 13:9). On the other hand, those who turn to the cultivation of true godliness are said to inscribe their names among the citizens of Jerusalem (*cf.* Isa. 56:5; Ps. 87:6). For this reason, it is said in another psalm: 'Remember me, O Jehovah, with favour toward thy people; visit me with salvation: that I may see the well-doing of thy chosen ones, that I may rejoice in the joy of thy nation, that I may be glad with thine inheritance' (Ps. 106:4-5; *cf.* Ps. 105:4). By these words God's fatherly favour and the especial witness of spiritual life are limited to his flock, so that it is always disastrous to leave the church.

Would that we could learn and teach these lessons today! So many churches and believers are weakened because of the low ecclesiology of modern evangelicalism. We need to return to being high-church evangelicals, not high in the sense of ritualistic but in holding a high doctrine of church, ministry and sacraments. On earth the church is the place where God dwells, where Christ reigns, where the Spirit works. The church is the New Testament equivalent of the Old Testament land and nation and priesthood and temple and holy place and most holy place and inner sanctuary and even the mercy seat, the place of atonement. It is the place on earth where God dwells to save and to bless his people. It is the place where we hear his word, find his forgiveness, encounter his glory.

DONALD ALLISTER is Vicar of Cheadle, Cheshire

Endnotes:

- 1) "Articles of Religion," *The Book of Common Prayer*, (1562).
- 2) The Ordinary is almost always the diocesan bishop, except in a few odd cases such as Royal Peculiars and some College or Prison Chapels. During a vacancy-in-sea it is almost always the archbishop of the province.
- 3) "The Ordering of Priests," *The Book of Common Prayer*.
- 4) Prefatory rubric, "The Lord's Supper or Holy Communion," *The Book of Common Prayer*.
- 5) I am aware of the textual problem here, with the Received Text using the plural *ekklesiae*, but Metzger's comments in favour of the singular reading seem persuasive. See Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* UBS (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1975).
- 6) E.J. Bicknell, *A Theological Introduction to the Thirty-nine Articles* (Longmans, 1932).

- 7) Article XX.
- 8) The story of how the version of the Nicene Creed in the Prayer Book's Communion service comes to omit the word 'holy' is an interesting one: the Reformers' textual criticism of the Greek and Latin originals apparently led them to believe mistakenly that the word was a later addition (Neil & Willoughby, *The Tutorial Prayer Book*, [Harrison Trust, 1912]). So much for the assured results of textual criticism, however sound the scholars may be! 'Holy' is rightly restored in the *ASB*, and in Common Worship. But it does appear in the Prayer Book in the Apostles' Creed used at Morning and Evening Prayer.
- 9) Sadly the *New Revised Standard Version* (normally a good translation and often more literal than the *New International Version*) which uses inclusive language but only where that makes no theological difference, misses this point and translates *tou theou anthropos* as 'everyone who belongs to God'.
- 10) Cranmer's episcopalianism is not a problem here. Both men saw bishops as an acceptable form of hierarchy in certain situations. Neither would have tolerated the insistence on episcopal ordination to validate a church or its ministry, though they accepted it as a matter of order in an already episcopal situation.
- 11) John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, (ed.) (John T. McNeill, Westminster/SCM, 1960).
- 12) In Cheadle Parish Church there is, sadly, a woodcarving, beautiful I am told though I find it blasphemous, of Mary crowned as Queen of Heaven. But there is a queen in heaven, the church, the bride of Christ the King.