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REFORMING THE CHURCH

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The Church of England today is far from what it should be as a reformed catholic Church. Many now believe it to be impossible for the Church to be transformed and reformed because God has forsaken the Church. If they are right then the logical step is to abandon the Church rather than waste energy and resources seeking to reform it. Against this it can be said that there have been bleaker times in the past. Did not the Church appear to have forsaken the gospel in the days of Wycliffe and the Lollards? What hope could there have been in the days immediately prior to the Reformation? The testimony of history is that in the past God has acted in His gracious mercy to breathe new life into the Church. Moreover, given the benefits of a truly reformed national Church we will not lightly throw away the vision nor our heritage. But, what must we do? What can we do?

Prayer

God is sovereign and unless He acts to bring change then all our efforts will come to nothing. *Unless the Lord builds the house those who build it labour in vain.* This does not excuse us from taking other action but we must make prayer the priority. The Church of England is failing to honour God and therefore our principal prayer must be that God will act to uphold the honour of His name.

Furthermore we recognise that our struggle is not against flesh and blood but against the spiritual forces of evil (Eph 6.12). Therefore whilst we must be equipped with the full armour of God prayer is to overshadow all we seek to do (Eph 6.18).

Our nation is increasingly turning away from some of the Biblical standards and principles that once guided it. The nation will not be changed for good unless there is true revival in the churches and therefore they must have the first call on our prayers.

Personal transformation

It is easy to treat prayer as if we were enlisting God on our side. We are in a battle and therefore it is tempting to think that in prayer we are trying to persuade God to fight for us. C H Spurgeon once remarked that prayer is the tool by which the potter shapes the clay. When we pray and are truly open to God then He will be at work to shape us. Therefore if we pray sincerely for God to uphold the honour of His name we will have a growing sense of our own failings. This makes such prayer deeply uncomfortable. But we must be willing to be changed ourselves; *first remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye. (Mtt 7.5)* If the Church is to be reformed we must ourselves be committed to Biblical truth, and living by it.

Faithful fellowships

The life-blood of the Church of England is its parishes. New life and transformation will arise from the parishes and therefore they must be our priority. Much is happening and it is good to remember this.

Outward looking

In the present climate it is no good battening down the hatches, there has been too much of this not least amongst some non-conformist congregations who have become battle-weary and therefore retreated. The need is for Churches to grow and be outward looking. We must be welcoming to people without compromising on the gospel message and without selling believers short on the commands of God for holiness. It is a great encouragement to see some of the initiatives that are taking place including the regional Partnerships which are ecumenical (in the proper sense) and driven by the desire to grow.

Transformation

A key purpose of the Church is to build up believers: *let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together. Heb. 10:24-25.* Likewise, in Ephesians 4 when Paul describes the role of ministries including pastor-teachers we see that they are to equip people for ministry and help them to grow in maturity (cf. Eph 4).

Teaching the truth

There is therefore great need today for clear teaching. The failure of the modern Church can be attributed in large part to the failure of clergy to teach and the unwillingness of congregations to learn. Clergy are under great pressure to compromise on preparation for lack of time and also to keep sermons short and entertaining. It has been a mark of the Church in times of decay that it has replaced preaching with entertainment, an example being the Medieval mystery plays. Without solid food people do not grow and are ill equipped to take their stand.

The greatest need is for people to have their confidence in the Bible restored. Despite the many attacks that have been made on the authenticity and accuracy of the Bible over the last two centuries it has stood firm. This ought to cause people to think, but the attacks go on and again and again the same groundless criticisms are trotted out. Those who do not want to live by the standards of God set out in Scripture have to find ways to silence the Word. It is incredible what passes as biblical argument in many Anglican gatherings and those who criticise the Bible the most are the most likely to rip quotations out of context in order to support their own views.

There have been, and continue to be many good initiatives to encourage Biblical preaching and to reinforce confidence in the Bible. However, what seems to have been lacking in English evangelicalism in recent years has been a focus on doctrine and systematic theology. I was once criticised by an evangelical Church because I mentioned the 39 Articles and the Anglican understanding of Baptism. The lack of doctrinal coherence makes churches weak to resist error. Moreover, Martin Lloyd-Jones maintained that *The history of the church shows clearly that her great and glorious periods always follow the mighty preaching of doctrine.* (Christian Unity on Eph 4.12-16).

Leadership

There is no secret in the fact that the numbers of ordained clergy in the Church of England has nosedived. Moreover, the average age of those being ordained has increased and the number of

men coming forward has fallen dramatically. The evangelical patronage bodies have seen a significant fall in the number of clergy looking for posts and considerable difficulty has been experienced in filling certain types of parish.

There are some very encouraging signs in leadership training in the Church of England but there are also some substantial threats to the distinctiveness of training for evangelical ministry. There are still concerns voiced about evangelicals struggling to be accepted for ministry but on the whole this does not appear to be a problem. Of more concern is the fact that some Dioceses appear to actively discriminate against Oak Hill College.

Moreover, although there are now many young people who are seeking to be involved in Christian ministry it is proving hard to get them to consider ordained Anglican ministry. This is vital area for prayer and action.

Protection from error

It is apparent from the New Testament that for Christians to grow they must be protected from error. The danger to Christian fellowship is real and striking. The duty to guard the flock is laid on the elders (eg Acts 20.28f) and is spelt out in the formularies of the Church of England (the 1662 Ordinal). Faithfulness to scripture and ordination vows requires action and often this will necessitate barring from our pulpits those who teach error, even if they be Bishops. Some churches have tried to provide an objective basis for such action by requiring all preachers to assent to a clear statement of orthodoxy on key contemporary issues.

It is also apparent in Scripture that there are times when, to be faithful to God, we must separate from those in error (cf. 2 John 1.10, 2 Thes 3.5-6, 1 Tim 6.5 also 1 Cor 5.11 & Mtt 18.17). This has led to people withdrawing from meetings where fellowship is being expressed. We are also mindful of the warning of the Lord Jesus to those who simply tolerated false teaching (Rev 2.2).

These actions should not be driven by bloody-mindedness but should be acts of genuine love. They are intended to safeguard the flock but they are also to be a sign to those in error that they have separated themselves from God and must repent. Without proper discipline the Church will not be reformed.

Wise stewardship

Christian giving is an aspect of fellowship. Therefore, where fellowship is broken it is inconsistent to continue to give money except for humanitarian reasons. Christian giving is to be done cheerfully (2 Cor 9.7) and it is evident that this has become increasingly difficult for many people as they feel strongly that the finances of the Church of England are being used to prop up false teachers, ungodly individuals and churches which are preaching a different gospel. These considerations have been causing increasing numbers of individuals and parishes to look at how they give. The problem we face is how to relate the principles to the peculiar financial arrangements of the Church of England. This matter has recently been addressed more fully in a leaflet from Church Society entitled 'Faithful Stewards'. We have argued that parishes must seek to bring accountability back into the way in which finance is handled.

Engaging with integrity

By its confessional standards the Church of England is a reformed Church and we wish to convict others of the rightness of this position. We do believe that others are faithful to Scripture or to the Church and we wish to convict and convince them of this. Past generations of evangelicals believed strongly that they had a task to bring about the conversion of those within churches, no least other leaders, who were spiritually dead.

Being part of the Church of England we will be committed to its structures even though integrity may force us to refuse fellowship on occasions. There are clearly areas of Church life that need to be changed. But changing these alone will not bring true reform. The problem we face as a Church is of spiritual infidelity. The Protestant Reformation took root because God brought about spiritual renewal and raised up those who worked to change the structures, doctrines and practices of the churches.

In engaging in the structures of the Church our motivation is crucial. If we set out to use the structures to bring change we will be seduced into playing political games in order to gain what we desire. This will lead to ungodly compromise and loss of integrity. Our example must be the likes of Joseph, Esther and Daniel, who did not seek positions of power but endeavoured to serve God faithfully in whatever role God appointed to them. They maintained integrity when the path of worldly wisdom might have dictated otherwise.

If we would see the Church reformed then our desire must be to be faithful to God, come what may.