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THE ROCHESTER REPORT – A NEW PROVINCE?

David Phillips

The Rochester Report gives brief attention to the possibility of a new province as one of the options of making provision for those who uphold the historic view of women's ministry. There are two different groups who have been pushing for this; Forward in Faith (FiF) and the Third Province Movement (TPM). The former is largely Anglo-Catholic in make-up; the latter includes a broader spectrum and has several evangelicals on its Council.

A couple of weeks before the Rochester Report was released FiF produced their own report, 'Consecrated Women?' Not only did this cover the theological and practical issues it contained within it an actual draft measure for the creation of a new province drawn up by some prominent lawyers. If the option of a new province is pursued then this draft measure in Consecrated Women will almost certainly form the starting point for discussion.

A parish that has passed either Resolution A or B in relation to women's ministry cannot ignore these proposals. As they stand they will affect you.

Under the proposals any parish that has passed Resolution C (petitioning for alternative oversight under the Episcopal Ministry Act of Synod) would become part of the new province unless they deliberately opted out. There are around 500 'C' parishes so the new province would be significantly bigger than the Scottish Episcopal Church. To the best of my knowledge no more than a handful of evangelical parishes have passed Resolution C.

According to the figures there are 810 parishes who have passed Resolution A (not allowing a woman to administer the Lord's Supper etc) and 1002 parishes who have passed Resolution B (not allowing a woman to be the Vicar etc). If we assume all A parishes have passed B (there is no statistic for this) then this gives around 500 parishes who have passed A or B but not C. These parishes have declined to allow a woman as their minister, but have not sought oversight of other Bishops. My guess would be that around half these are evangelical Churches of some description.

Under the proposals in 'Consecrated Women?' the Priests (Ordination of Women) Measure would be revoked, that is to say, no more Resolutions A & B. Parishes that opted to remain in their existing province would have to accept the full ministry of women, there could be no no-go areas. This is only fair and it makes perfect sense. The expectation would be that if a parish continues to hold that they do not wish to have a woman presbyter then they should join the new province. Therefore, those parishes that have passed A or B would have to make a decision, to join the new province or to accept the possibility of a woman as minister.

If legislation to consecrate women goes ahead, which is not certain, and if a new Province came into being, which is even more uncertain, then those parishes who have passed Resolution B out of faithfulness to Scripture would have to join the new Province in order to keep their principled stand. However, it is clear that many evangelicals are not enthusiastic about the idea of a new Province. In addition to 'Consecrated Women' Forward in Faith have also produced 'The New Province – A Summary' costing £2.50 which answers some of the practical questions. My concern here is to look at how evangelicals view the proposals and ask how significant the points raised are.

Evangelical comments

Would we end up in a province that was predominantly Anglo-Catholic?

Would we end up simply squabbling with one another over all the old issues but without the liberals to separate and occupy us?

Is it really better to have an Anglo-Catholic Bishop, who might be papist, rather than a woman Bishop who might be broadly evangelical?

Why do we want to separate from those who agree with us on the gospel but disagree on the role of women in order to be united with those who disagree with us on the gospel?

Would the new province be a stepping off point to full unity with Rome?

Are we not just opting into an ecclesiastical structure with all the same problems, when what we really need is reform?

The composition of the new province

If all the parishes that have passed resolution B chose to join the new province then it would have around 1,000 parishes. I would guess that at least a quarter of these would be conservative or charismatic evangelical. Of the remainder, many are not Anglo-catholic and not all anglo's are the same, or even pro-Roman. There could well be a majority of Anglo-catholic clergy but because many of the evangelical churches are quite large there would be a much greater balance amongst the laity even, conceivably, a majority from evangelical churches.

Truth and error and the future

We disagree fundamentally with Anglo-catholics about the nature of the gospel and indeed about the nature of authority. There is nothing to be gained by pretending other than this, nor in trying to lessen the depth of this division. For this reason a new province as envisaged would not be ideal. It would not, of course, be a pure evangelical church and if many evangelicals refused to join those who did could end up as a small minority. However, at least with Anglo-catholics, even Romanists, we can agree that there is a truth to disagree about; the liberal notion of truth is about as tangible as a will-o-the-wisp.

One of the ironies of the modern Church of England is that both evangelicals and catholics blame the other for the rise of liberalism. As evangelicals, not least in Church Society, we see the lawlessness of 19th and early 20th century Anglo-catholics as the reason why there is no longer any discipline in the Church. We also believe that they twist the plain meaning of the 39 articles in order to believe things that are unbelievable, and thus opened the way to liberals doing the same thing. Many anglo-catholics believe that the modern Church of England betrays the inherent weakness of Protestantism; our convictions about the supremacy of Scripture and private judgement actually lead to fragmentation and error because there is no effective restraint. For some the only solution to this is to reunite with Rome because only the papacy can provide this. We must acknowledge that the accusation is just, even if the solution is abhorrent.

We see all too clearly that within evangelical churches and particularly scholarship today novelty of interpretation has become the driving force. So, for example, people are prepared to argue that the Scripture supports the ordination of women and to do so by interpreting passages of Scripture in a way that no-one in the past would have dreamt of using them. The restraint that the mainstream reformers relied on was their views were not novelties but were entirely consistent with Scripture and with how earlier generations of Christians understood Scripture. This approach can be clearly seen in the English Reformers, with later leaders like Jewel and Hooker and has been the classical Anglican position. Despite our insistence 'scripture alone' and private judgment we will temper our views by taking counsel from past generations of Christians – which is the right use of tradition.

The Church of England found a peculiar but not ineffective means of addressing this issue. It established formularies setting out the theological position of the Church, allowed for the theoretical possibility that these might contain error (because Churches do err) but made parliament the custodian trustee of these formularies, in effect preventing change. When Church Society challenged the legality of the legislation to ordain women just over a decade ago the Courts ruled that Synod could not change the formularies, but, under intense political pressure, that ordaining women did not represent a change to the formularies, but only to the canons. Therefore the continued security of a new province must rest on the same basis as the present two, the formularies of the Church. Indeed, unless the new province has these as its theological basis and Parliament as its custodian it will not be the Church of England. 'Consecrated Women?' does assert that the formularies will be upheld, but it does not spell out how. In my view the Worship and Doctrine Measure 1974 must apply and this must be made abundantly clear in any legislation.

In the end we cannot legislate to prevent error, the Scriptures themselves provide ample evidence that the devil will assault the work of God wherever it exists. Indeed it may be that divisions are necessary to demonstrate those who are approved (1 Cor 11.19). A new province will not be perfect, and our own formularies admit that no church can be free from error. The question will be whether it represents a better option than the alternatives for safeguarding the truth, facilitating gospel proclamation and transforming the world.

What of Rome? In its attempts to safeguard the truth against error it has actually produced, through the doctrine of papal infallibility, a means of protecting error against truth. For evangelicals the Roman option would be like jumping out of the frying pan and into the inferno.

Reform or renovation

We thank God for the formularies of the Church of England, which represent a fine summary of Biblical truth. They are neither perfect nor exhaustive, but they are good. Nevertheless there are clearly many areas of our church life that are in need of reform, and one that is constantly talked about is the role of Bishops. Would the new province end up enshrining practices that are in need of reform? There are reasons to think that this might not be the case, for example the Anglo-catholic experience of the flying Bishops has led them to welcome a form of oversight which is less territorial, more personal, less imposed and more enthusiastically embraced. This is encouraging but it does not remove our concerns. Many feel that the motivation of a new province is not to reform, but to renovate a delightful antique so that it looks more like it did in the past.

For a new province to be acceptable it must be clear that it is what the Church of England should be, a reformed catholic church. It cannot be a stopping off point on a journey to Rome, it must uphold the reformed doctrines of the Church of England and be reasonably secure from losing this inheritance.