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IS THERE A PROBLEM WITH PROTESTANTISM?

By David Phillips

Cardinal Kasper has suggested that Anglicanism needs a new Oxford Movement. To some within Anglicanism, particularly those ravaged by liberalism in North America, this will appear an attractive proposition. Behind it lie two assertions, first that Protestantism is continually dividing whereas Rome has maintained an essential unity. Secondly that Protestantism is unable to resist the threat of secularism in the western world and of theological liberalism in the Church and that the papacy is the only bastion which can stand.

Whilst we reject what is said about Romanism, we should nevertheless see that there is some substance to the accusations against Protestantism.

Unity

The old Oxford Movement was accused of uncritically adopting the Roman view of apostolic succession and then deducing, inevitably, that the Church of England did not have it. Likewise too much talk of unity today assumes the Roman understanding, which is focused in the institution of the Church. It is not simply that Rome puts the institution before truth, for them the institution of the Church is a vital part of the truth. The problem is that Roman Catholicism has distorted the truth of Scripture and has at times been utterly ruthless in dealing with those who dissent from their view.

But is unity so important? We must say that it cannot be. It has been said that there was no greater unity amongst the people of God than when they rose up to play and worship the Golden Calf at the foot of Mount Sinai. Nor should we forget the vision given to John in which 'the whole world was astonished and followed the beast' (Rev 13.3). Unity in error is no unity at all and as Protestants we reject union with Rome for that very reason.

Whilst reading theology I recall a Roman Catholic tutor warning us Anglicans not to run to Rome if the Church of England ordained women as priests. He said that Rome could just as easily change its position and then argue that had been its view all along. I doubt this is true, but perhaps the parallel with The Ministry of Truth rewriting history in Orwell's *1984* is not without some substance.

The heart of unity

As Protestants we accept the accusation that our churches have fragmented so much. Yet curiously in this very fragmentation I believe we see something of the basis of true unity. There is amongst evangelical Christians a sense of unity which is hard to define but which crosses denominational boundaries and is independent of any institution or of any attempt to impose unity. We can see this at work historically from the Reformation onwards, even beforehand with the Lollards, and it is evident today in the Gospel Partnerships and many other such things. This phenomenon is recognised by ecumenists but they do not seem to be able to comprehend it.

At the heart of this unity is a shared commitment to the supreme authority of Scripture. This, in turn, leads to a shared commitment to the gospel of justification by faith alone in Christ alone and to an evangelical action in proclaiming Christ and living out Biblical faith. Therefore, if I visit my local Independent, Congregationalist or Grace Baptist church I have a sense of fellowship which I do not feel with many other Anglicans, or with most Methodists or Union Baptists. It seems to me that the further people are from this shared commitment to the supremacy of Scripture the harder it

becomes to feel that warmth of fellowship. Evangelical laity in particular demonstrate how freely we move between fellowships which have a clear Evangelical foundation. I am encouraged in this understanding because part of the written objectives of Church Society and the National Church League before is to strive for reunion of *Christendom on the basis of the supreme authority of Holy Scripture as God's Revelation of His will for man*.

This sort of unity exists despite the fact that no-one is trying to create it and we might even say despite our best efforts to frustrate it. I can have some sympathy with those who say that this is the only level of unity we should desire, but as Anglicans that is not our way, we still believe there is value in some form of structural unity.

Anglican Unity

The Church of England presents a model, which at present looks rather pathetic, but in principle is rather good. Part of our unity comes from the fact that the Church of England is the English national Church existing with some degree of structures since before there was one English nation. It is part of the universal, catholic, Church, but it is also a church that reformed itself.

The Church of England holds at its very core those great truths which are at the core of true unity, the nature of the gospel, and supreme authority of the Word of God. This is important because our commitment to the institution is tempered by the fact the Church is under the authority of the Word of God, as our Articles affirm. Because churches are made up of fallible men and women they can make decisions which are wrong (Article 21) so the Church must continually seek to reform itself under the Word of God.

Our church recognises the danger of corruption and in particular that clergy can so easily become the chief source of the problem and they are often not the best to bring about reform, they have too much vested interest. This means that reform often comes from the laity and part of the dynamic of establishment is that it has been a way, not necessarily the only way, of facilitating this, but always such reform must be under the Word of God.

This is a fine model, part of the reason it has failed is because too many people in the Church no longer accept the supreme authority of Scripture. They may articulate this as saying it is all 'a matter of interpretation', but at heart it is more than that. Despite this we thank God that at present the foundations are still intact and that is why we are still committed to the Church of England, it is possible to rebuild on solid foundations. A new Oxford Movement is not going to work because like the old Oxford Movement it would seek to undermine the foundations.

Uniformity

Protestantism has fragmented and it has proved fertile ground for theological liberalism. Part of this is the failure to accept the supreme authority of Scripture, yet we also have to say that it can seem that even amongst those who accept Scripture "every man does what is right in his own eyes".

Here again we could be tempted to think that an institution could solve our problems by dictating what is and is not acceptable. To some extent that is what the Church of England has offered but only if there is that recognition that the church can err, and also the determination to keep Scripture supreme.

Anglicanism also offers a model of how we can do this because it has sought at least historically to approach Scripture in a measured and humble way. We do not simply rush to our own conclusions regarding Scripture but try to weigh them against those of others, and particularly those of the Church through history. We are prepared to come to an opinion which is out of line with those who have gone before us in faith, but we do so very cautiously recognising that we may be

those who are mistaken. This is apparent in the way in which our Reformers and others looked to the understanding of past generations, and not just the early Church, in order to test their own reading of Scripture.

On the other hand the fundamental flaw of liberalism is that people are convinced that they have an understanding of Scripture and of the past that is far superior to what has gone before and therefore have no compunction in coming to conclusions which are completely at odds with traditional Christian belief.

The accusations made against Protestantism are not without substance, we do see fragmentation and we have seen unrestrained liberalism destroying churches. But Rome is not the answer because it puts itself above Scripture and above reform and has therefore served to protect and institutionalise error.

The Church of England is a sad reflection of what it ought to be, yet its vision as a Church recognising its own frailties and humbly submitting to the Word of God is worth fighting for.

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