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THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND ‘CATHOLIC’ OR REFORMED?

Church Society Conference Report 2009

By David Meager

Church Society met in May for its annual Conference at High Leigh. The aim was to determine whether the fundamental nature of the Church of England is ‘Catholic’ (i.e. unreformed) or ‘Reformed’. The speakers asked to tackle this were Roger Beckwith, former Warden of Latimer House Oxford; Lee Gatiss, Associate minister of St Helen’s Bishopsgate; Angus MacLeay, Rector of St Nicholas Sevenoaks and Paul Darlington, minister of Holy Trinity Oswestry.

On the opening day Roger Beckwith addressed the question of whether the CofE was historically ‘Catholic’ or ‘Reformed.’ Roger explained that although Anglo-Catholicism and Liberalism had made inroads in the last 150 years the basis of the CofE was in fact reformed. At the time of the Reformation Cranmer and the other Reformers had reformed the CofEs Formularies and Prayer Book with the help of Continental Reformers such as Martin Bucer. The Formularies had been modelled on continental Protestant revisions, for example the Lutheran Confession of Augsburg.

Roger then explained that the word ‘catholic’ meant ‘universal’ or ‘general’ and should not be confused with Roman Catholic or Anglo-Catholic, but rather ‘catholic’ expresses those who hold the common Biblical faith. Since the CofE Formularies acknowledge the ancient creeds (which also contain the word catholic) the CofE can therefore claim to be both catholic (in the true sense of the word) and reformed (unlike the Church of Rome which can be called neither catholic or reformed since it has distorted the catholic doctrine of justification by faith alone.)

Day one closed with David Phillips leading an open session about why there are so few conservative evangelicals in positions of senior leadership in the CofE (2 out of 270). David presented the results of a Church Society survey of 96 conservative evangelical clergy to ascertain their attitudes to these positions. The survey revealed that there are barriers to senior positions because our views were considered too narrow. There were also aspects of these jobs which many found unappealing e.g. the pressure to compromise and the administrative nature of these posts.

On day two Lee Gatiss spoke about the life and times of Augustus Montague Toplady (1740-1778). Lee explained that as conservative evangelicals in the CofE we are fighting against a majority hostile to our views and this is making it harder to persuade people that Anglicanism is a good option to minister in. We therefore need to strive to rediscover our reformed heritage in the CofE and the life and writings of Toplady can help us do this. Before speaking about Toplady, Lee helped us to understand the context by outlining what had happened in the CofE from the time of the Reformation up until the late 17th Century.

Lee explained that the reformed (Calvinistic) faith had been established as the national religion at the time of the Reformation, but over the course of the next 200 years there had been Arminian challenges to this. Under Charles I and Archbishop Laud, and again under Charles II there had been attempts to drive out Calvinist ministers from the church, culminating in the infamous Act of Uniformity in 1662. Eventually religious toleration was granted with the overthrow of James II and the arrival of William of Orange, and Calvinist clergy were again able to minister in the CofE – Reformed theology had not died out in the CofE!

Lee then drew out some lessons for us today. Reformed Anglicanism is still alive today but could

we be driven out (as the Puritans were in 1662) if we are forced to go against conscience? e.g. over women bishops or accepting homosexual practice. For past Christians doctrine mattered and was worth fighting for, their strength of character and 'spine' should challenge us.

Following the Church Society AGM Lee gave his second talk on Toplady. Lee explained that prior to the 18th Century Evangelical Revival the church was largely dead, with immorality and apathy rife in the lives of clergy and laity alike. Although the religious landscape was bleak many of the CofE Bishops (e.g. Edward Reynolds and John Pearson) and Deans held decidedly reformed views (even though they were often high church in practice). However, under the preaching of Whitefield and Wesley there was widespread revival. Into this scene Toplady was born in 1740. Through the reading of Manton and Jerome Zanchius, Toplady became a thorough Calvinist and staunch defender of Calvinism in the CofE. In 1769 he published *The Doctrine of Absolute Predestination Stated and Asserted* (a translation of Zanchius' work) and disputed with Arminians (including John Wesley). In 1774 he published *The historic proof of the doctrinal Calvinism of the Church of England.* Interestingly, Toplady proved his hypotheses not by arguing from the 39 Articles, BCP or Homilies but by providing an historical overview of what the early Church Fathers, Reformers and CofE clergy had taught over the centuries. This showed decisively that Arminism is not Anglican, and according to J.C. Ryle, Toplady's work was 'unanswered and unanswerable.'

Lee then applied this to our current situation. We have a good heritage in the CofE and although the situation has been bad in the past the gospel is the power of God for salvation. The mess we see in society can be cleaned up as it was in the 18th Century. We need to pray for revival and evangelise passionately and not just in the cities but also in rural areas (as the 18th Century evangelists did). We shouldn't be surprised by opposition from within the church, or when 'Open Evangelicals' or 'evangelical' bishops attack our doctrine.

Day two ended with Michael Walters (Chairman of Church Society Trust) leading an open session about parish reorganisations. Michael explained that dioceses are increasingly opting to reorganise parishes and suspend presentation because of a lack of finance to pay for clergy. Patrons (such as Church Society Trust) are therefore often losing influence in appointments, particularly in rural multi-parish benefices.

On each day Angus MacLeay gave an exposition from the book of Habakkuk. In his first exposition (Habakkuk 1) Angus described how the world around us seems to be falling apart - politically, economically and ecclesiologically (i.e. the Anglican Communion). Angus encouraged us to look to the book of Habakkuk for wisdom since he too lived through tumultuous times. There was internal strife and violence in Judah as God's laws were paralysed. Habakkuk's response (which we often echo) was to ask God 'why don't you do something?' The Lord's reply was to do something but it wasn't what Habakkuk was expecting: God would raise up the Babylonian's to crush them (in fulfilment of Deuteronomy 28). Habakkuk felt torn, although he had complete confidence in God he still asked 'Lord do you know what you are doing?' since the curse seemed worse than the original problem.

In his second talk (Habakkuk 2) Angus explained how Habakkuk's questions in chapter 1 would be answered. God will have the last word as woes are pronounced on Babylon for its rampant greed, blood shedding, drunkenness and idolatry. Whilst these woes are pronounced the righteous are encouraged to live by faith as they trust God to keep his promises. Angus encouraged us to live by our faith in Christ in a hostile and changing world.

Angus' final talk (Habakkuk 3) answered the question 'what do we do when the world around us is in turmoil?' Habakkuk looked back to God's word to see what God did in the past in delivering them from Egypt and this encouraged him in the present. Even though the trappings of wealth have

been taken away by the Babylonians, he can still rejoice in God (v17-19) because he is his Saviour. Our true treasure is in Christ (Phil 3) not in materialism and wealth.

The Conference finished with Paul Darlington explaining what it was like to be an evangelical ministering in a parish which had previously been Anglo-Catholic. Paul spoke of the challenges he had faced over the four years since he arrived and the progress that had been made in teaching the congregation the gospel of grace. He said that when confronting practices which have no grounding in Scripture people may not be able to explain why they do them, but are often emotionally attached to them, so they have to be challenged sensitively. The great need is to love people, to show them from Scripture the kindness of God's grace and to seek to present them mature in Christ. He concluded with a plea; across the country there are thousands of 'lost sheep' sitting in congregations week by week who need to hear the gospel.

Overall the Conference was a great encouragement as we were reminded of the reformed nature of the Church of England and how God has acted in the past to establish, protect and revive it. We were also encouraged because there are still good opportunities for conservative evangelical ministry today.

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