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THE TRACTARIANS

By David Phillips

The straw that broke the camel's back and led to the Tractarian movement was a Bill passed by Parliament in 1833 which effectively abolished two archbishoprics and eight bishoprics in Ireland. The reform was needed but it stirred into action a group of people who increasingly resented the influence of the state in what they believed were spiritual matters. In July 1833 John Keble preached on what he called 'national apostasy' at St. Mary's Oxford. Others, such as John Henry Newman, Hurrell Froude and William Palmer rallied to the cause. In September 1833 they began to publish what became known as the Oxford Tracts giving rise to the names the Oxford Movement and Tractarianism.

The High Church party at the time was strongly committed to the institution of the Church and to the protestant establishment. Some High Churchmen agreed that the dignity of the Church was under attack but others saw Tractarianism itself as an attack on establishment. The University authorities in Oxford disassociated publicly from the Tracts.

Principles of the Tractarians

Issues addressed in the early Tracts included:

- Apostolic Succession by the laying on of hands
- That it was sacrilege for non-Church bodies to lay hands on the Church.
- The assertion that the Church of England is part of the Catholic Church and entirely separate from the state.
- A strong opposition to the emerging liberalism.
- A focus on personal holiness.

However, these were just the tip of the iceberg.

Initial Evangelical Response

Evangelicals at this time were a definite party with two main newspapers. The more moderate Observer and the firmer Record (now the Church of England Newspaper). Both papers appeared two or three times a week.

The Observer appears to have ignored the tracts but on 2 December 1833 the editor of The Record wrote:

We doubt not most of our clerical readers have heard of the formation of a society at Oxford with a view to the preservation of the Church, and which seeks to extend its ramifications over the entire country.

The paper printed an open letter from the Oxford men to the Archbishop of Canterbury stating that there was nothing objectionable in the letter. But it also printed extracts from eight of the early Tracts with the comment:

They speak in a language which it is impossible any well-informed man should misunderstand; and, under this conviction, we leave them for the present, without a single remark, although they will give occasion ere long to not a few.

Not a few words followed. In the next issue the Editor wrote:

Had we not read them with our own eyes, it would have been difficult to persuade us that such

effusions could have escaped, at any time, from the pen of Protestant clergymen...

The editorial goes on to expose the errors of the Tracts calling them *melancholy and wicked Popish delusions*

The main attack is on the notion of Apostolical Descent which was so important to the Tractarians. Indeed the paper calls the movement the Apostolical Society at Oxford. The paper asserts that the Church of England cannot claim apostolic descent in Roman terms because it broke from Rome, but the Roman view is entirely man-centred and erroneous. Therefore, whilst the Church of England does have apostolical succession we do not attach the same importance to it as Rome.

It should be clear that from the outset there were evangelicals who understood theological errors that lay at the heart of the Oxford Movement and opposed it publicly.

Development

Hurrell Froude, one of the initial Oxford four, died shortly afterward and his “theological remains” were published in 1838. These made plain his opposition to the Protestant Reformation and his empathy for Medieval Catholicism.

Moreover, some of the younger men attracted by the Tracts could see the logical outcome of their arguments. They became critical of the practices of the Church of England and idealised, and in some cases adopted, the practices of the Church of Rome.

In 1841 John Henry Newman published his famous Tract 90 in which he attempted to argue that the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion, properly understood, were supportive of rather than antagonistic to Roman Catholic doctrine. Later, Newman would recognise the error of this assertion and desert to Rome.

Evangelical Response

Some have argued that evangelical opposition only arose with time but we have seen that this is not the case. Others have said that evangelical theology only took shape in response to Tractarianism, but this is also false. Even if you are seen to sharpen your sword before a battle it does not mean you did not own the sword beforehand. Nevertheless there were some notable evangelical responses in particular William Goode’s masterpiece on the supremacy of Scripture entitled ‘*The Divine Rule of Faith and Practice*’ (1842).

Opposition to evangelicals

The assumption of Evangelicals was that they were the legitimate Anglicans, the true heirs of the Reformed Church of England and their publications reflected this. The Gorham case of 1846 therefore caused shock. The Bishop of Exeter ruled that the Church of England taught baptismal regeneration, and that the Revd George Cornelius Gorham, an evangelical, did not. This ruling was upheld by the Church courts and Gorham was refused a parish.

Evangelicals were alarmed, some spoke of the possibility that thousands of them would have to leave the Church of England. They therefore appealed the matter to a higher court, the Privy Council, and in 1850 the appeal was won.

This demonstrated that within the hierarchy of the Church evangelicals were poorly represented, but they were strong amongst the laity. But Tractarians saw the Privy Council as part of the machinery of the state, rather than a Church court.

Clarifying the law

The Gorham case showed that Evangelicals could not take their own understanding of the Prayer Book and Articles for granted. Tractarianism had led to a growth in ritualism which the evangelicals considered illegal but few Bishops were willing to take action.

In 1865 the evangelicals formed the Church Association partly in order to clarify the law, as the Gorham ruling had done. A number of test cases were brought and many were won, though not all. Evangelicals considered that this settled the matter, but the Tractarians simply refused to obey the law, and the Church hierarchy was unwilling to enforce it. What should evangelicals do?

Attempts to enforce the law

The Church Association took the view that if Bishops would not enforce the law, then they as laymen must act and they took the matter to the courts, which were of course sitting as Church courts. When the Courts ruled on the matter the Tractarians still refused to obey and so were found to be in contempt of court with the inevitable sentence of imprisonment.

It is commonly argued that by this action the Association lost the battle because public opinion swung in favour of Tractarianism. This assessment may be fair, but if discipline is a mark of a true church then the Association was not at fault, but those who refused to enforce discipline. The collapse of discipline within the Church of England has bedevilled us ever since and it opened the door to progress of theological liberalism which the early Tractarians had opposed.

Sadly, the legal action also caused division and fragmentation amongst the evangelicals.

Evangelical Fragmentation

The leadership of evangelicalism was in transition. Goode, McNeil, Venn, Bickersteth, Shaftesbury and Close were all in glory or nearing its gates. The new leaders were men like Canon Christopher, JC Ryle and Anthony Thorold and another generation was emerging including Chavasse, Moule, Wace and Griffith-Thomas.

Professor Wolfe wrote in *Churchman*

Changes in personnel were associated with what has been termed a 'transformation' of the Evangelical party, a gradual withdrawal from the policy of ritual prosecution, a trend towards revivalism and holiness teaching, under the influence of Moody and Keswick respectively, and a general reaction against the vigorous polemicism of the mid-Victorian period.

In addition, the new leaders were not as reformed as their forebears. Despite all that we owe them Bishop Ryle, Dean Wace and W.H. Griffith-Thomas were less whole-hearted in supporting some aspects of classical reformed Protestantism.

The Church Association continued its course of prosecutions but in 1891 the Protestant Churchmen's Alliance was founded and absorbed the much older Protestant Association. This had the encouragement of Bishop Ryle and Lord Grimthorpe gave the opening address. In his long and robust talk he stated his dislike of the policy of the Association but blamed the Bishops for the necessity of the action. He argued that the Bishops should have deprived the ritualists of their livings. This new Alliance became part of the National Church League in 1893 and so rejoined with the Association in 1950 to form Church Society.

On the surface the presenting cause of division was not to do with truth but about how to respond to error. Nevertheless, it can be argued, that even here there is at heart a different view of the nature of the truth.

For the Church of England the rise of Tractarianism was a disaster. Not only did ritualism replace evangelical simplicity in worship, but also discipline was undermined and the failure to respond properly to error and false teaching has been with us ever since.

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