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Church Society Half-Day Conference Report 2012

By David Meager

Church Society met on Saturday 26th May, Oak Hill College, for its annual conference and AGM. James Crabtree, Chairman of Church Society Council, opened the conference with a brief exhortation from 2 Corinthians ch 6. After mentioning the Apostle Paul's extraordinary trials, James reminded us that we too need God's enabling power and gifts, through his Holy Spirit, if we are to stand firm in today's trials and difficulties. We too, like the Apostle Paul, can rejoice in our trials.

Following James' introduction, Revd Dr Mike Ovey, Principal of Oak Hill, spoke on the topic, 'Justification Now – The Reformation Doctrine and True Anglicanism.' Mike stated that his desire for Oak Hill College was that it would be known as a 'justification by faith alone college,' because this Reformation doctrine is consistent with true Anglicanism. Other types of Anglicanism that do not hold to this doctrine, are in fact, 'cuckoos in the nest.'

Mike outlined the context in which we, as contemporary Anglicans, find ourselves in. Many presenting problems that we face in the Church of England revolve around issues to do with sexuality, ethics and gender. According to Mike, these ethical issues have come to the fore because of the Church's failure to contend for the great Reformation doctrines at an earlier period. Once we were a denomination familiar with Reformation thinking, but now there is a widespread basic ignorance of such thinking in Anglican pews and pulpits – even evangelical ones. This ignorance has been accelerated by two errors which have arisen from amongst the church. First, The New Perspective, and secondly, the perceived irrelevance of classical evangelical teaching (whether penal substitution or the doctrine of justification). Both have been embraced by many within the church who would affirm the supremacy of Scripture, but now believe the classic doctrine of justification to be unpalatable and un-teachable.

Mike then described what we are to mean by justification by faith alone by looking at its Reformation context. The mediaeval church had confused the doctrine of justification by faith alone by adding works to salvation. Although there were some in the mediaeval period who upheld the doctrines of grace (e.g. Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Bradwardine), by the 15th Century most had moved away from the biblical doctrine of salvation, by teaching that God confers value on our works (congruent merit), and therefore our works contribute to our salvation. This idea is evidenced in the mediaeval theologian Gabriel Biel's sermon *The Circumcision of the Lord*. Biel does mention grace, but not grace alone. The mediaeval doctrine became 'repent and do what you can', rather than, 'repent and believe.' Mike then used the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector to show the distinction between someone trusting in grace and works, and someone trusting in grace alone for their salvation.

The doctrine of congruent merit ultimately does violence to God's character by treating an act, which was not perfect, as if it were. Consequently, creation would still be frustrated as there would still be no 'really' righteous people.

Mike outlined the Reformation response to this mediaeval doctrine of congruent merit. The key idea being that there is a righteous man (Christ) who keeps the Law for us – a new Adam. This idea is also contained in two sections from the *Sermon on Salvation* in the Anglican Book of Homilies, written by Thomas Cranmer, which are incorporated into the doctrinal formularies of Anglicanism in Articles 11 and 35. According to the Homily:

‘He for them fulfilled the law in his life. So that now in him and by him every true Christian man may be called a fulfiller of the law.’

Or in other words, justification can be summed up as, ‘Just-as-if-I’d always-kept the law.’ Jesus’ righteousness is treated as mine.

Jesus’ law keeping was perfect and expressed itself in staggering other person centred love – love to the Father in perfect obedience, and love to humanity e.g. the washing of his disciples feet and his payers for his persecutors. Because Jesus’ acts of obedience are counted as mine, my acts of obedience could add nothing to his. If Jesus is characterised by this other person centred love, then so should his followers. Self-love is therefore profoundly anti-God and results in arrogance, envy, anxiety and manipulation of others for my own ends.

Mike then explained how, in a similar way to mediaeval Roman Catholicism, the New Perspective undermines the traditional Reformation teaching of Justification by starting with grace but maintaining by works, or according to one commentator, ‘works wrought in the Spirit is the basis of our justification on the last day.’ However, our works are still imperfect, anything we add to Christ’s works would simply sully what he has done for us. We also need to remember that justification is a present reality – I can say that I am justified now, which is crucial for our assurance and humility. If we look to ourselves, and our works, to contribute to our justification, then there is the danger that we simply become narcissistic.

Following Mike’s talk, Church Society held its Annual General Meeting during which Lee Gatiss, the Director-Elect of Church Society, outlined his strategy and goals for the Society when he takes up his new role in January. Following Lee’s brief presentation Duncan Boyd, Council member, and Chairman of the Society’s ‘Keep Marriage Special’ campaign, then described several ways in which we could support the campaign. The AGM also held a Council election with several new members added. The Council consists of people in all kinds of ministries, lay and ordained, with a spectrum of ages, consisting of those in their 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s and 70s!

Following a short break, John Richardson then spoke on the title of his book published last year, *A strategy that Changes the Denomination*. John first outlined the reasons why the first National Evangelical Anglican Congress (NEAC), held at Keele University in 1967, had failed to transform the Church of England. Although there have been many thriving evangelical Anglican churches since 1967, the structures of the church, and consequently the Church of England as a whole, has not been transformed in the way envisaged at Keele.

Because this strategy had failed to transform the church, John explained that a better approach would be to follow the recommendations of a Church report published in 1945 entitled *Towards the Conversion of England*. Although the report had its imperfections, it set before the church the right goal in terms of desiring to see the conversion of the nation. The report defined evangelism as:

‘To evangelise is so to present Christ Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit, that men shall come to put their trust in God through him, to accept him as their Saviour and serve him as their King in the fellowship of the church.’

Sadly, the recommendations of the report were not acted upon, partly due to the death of Archbishop William Temple, the key architect of the report, but also because the Church of England devoted the following decade to ‘mistaken priorities’ i.e. it chose to pursue revising the canons and liturgy, rather than embarking on the evangelism that the report had envisaged.

John then explained that evangelical attempts to see the transformation of the church had largely

failed because, since the 1945 report, evangelicalism in the Church of England has lacked a politically astute, political leadership, to engage in the structures of the Church of England. If evangelicals desire to see the conversion of the nation (as per the 1945 report), then they need to work harder in the structures of the Church of England, without of course, compromising their evangelical doctrines.

John then spoke about some of his personal experiences of engaging in the structures, including how his parish had managed to get their deanery synod to promote evangelism in their diocese. John also spoke about the advice he had been given by the Archbishop of Sydney, Peter Jensen, in how to engage in church politics, and how this had borne fruit in Sydney Diocese. John encouraged us not to do church politics half-heartedly, but to be hard working and strategic if we want to achieve our gospel goals.

Overall, the conference was an encouragement as Mike reminded us of the gospel of grace, the only saving gospel, and John exhorted us to show more concern for the Church of England as a whole, if we want to see real gospel transformation, and the nation won for Christ. CDs are available from Church Society of both talks.

David Meager is a member of the Church Society staff team.