

QUESTION & ANSWER SESSION WITH LEE GATISS, DIRECTOR-ELECT OF CHURCH SOCIETY

Looking ahead to Lee Gatiss taking up his appointment as Director of Church Society in January, our Council Chairman, James Crabtree, has explored a number of major issues with Lee in the below Question and Answer session.

1. Why is it worth fighting to reform the Church of England?

I won't say "it's the best boat to fish from." There are many ways to be "fishers of men" today, and we need more labourers for the harvest regardless of which denomination they serve in. Yet, the Church of England has an honoured history as an instrument for spiritual conversion and growth in our nation. It was through a Reformed established church that we were saved from superstition and the false doctrines of Roman Catholicism at the Reformation.

It was through the national church and the parochial system in the 16th and 17th centuries that the Puritans sought to reach the dark corners of the land for Christ. When we were blessed with revivals in the 18th century it was through the preaching of Anglican clergymen like Wesley, Whitefield, Toplady, Hervey, and Romaine. In the nineteenth century, it was the Anglican expression of Christian faith which we exported to the world through the channels of empire and it was ably defended by men like Shaftesbury and Ryle. In the twentieth century it was the good old C of E which gave us John Stott, Jim Packer, Dick Lucas, and a number of the country's finest preachers, pastors, and theologians today. The official doctrinal standards of our denomination remain Reformed and Evangelical to the core, and the Queen swore to maintain "the true profession of the gospel... the Protestant Reformed religion." What will these great servants of the word say to us in glory, if our generation fails to fight for what they handed on to us? The Church of England today is a serviceable, if somewhat leaky, vessel, and it would be negligent of us to simply abandon it to the enemies of the gospel which has always been its greatest strength.

There's nothing wrong with starting new things from scratch, necessarily. But I believe God is greatly glorified through reformation and transformation, and his grace is seen to be at work where this has taken place in the past. Where there is death and decay, the Father can bring new life. Where there is corruption, the Lord Jesus can bring health and soundness. Where there is heresy and apostasy, the Spirit can convict and convert through his powerful word. They will be glorified should England turn back to the truth and again enjoy his blessing. So for the glory of God and the good of England, it is worth fighting to renew the Church of England as an instrument for God's purposes.

2. Why does the contemporary evangelical church need "reformed" theology?

By "Reformed theology" I take it you mean the romance and poetry at the heart of the gospel? The gospel is the story of how God in his mercy sent his Son to purify a people for his own possession, to the praise of his glorious grace. It's a love story, which makes most sense when expressed in the biblical idiom of predestinating love, intentional redemption, effective power, and eternal unbreakable covenant promise. Jesus is a "one woman man" – he loved his bride, his people, his church, and he loves her to the uttermost so that no-one can snatch her away from him. I think other species of theology tend to dampen down the wonder and stupendousness of this good news because they can't quite believe it's so good, and that God would take our salvation entirely upon

his own shoulders. Reformed theology at its best seeks to preach this undiluted soul-refreshment and defend it from the adulterating pollution of what the Anglican Homilies call “the stinking puddles of men’s traditions (devised by men’s imagination) for our justification and salvation.”

Again, Reformed theology is what the Reformation was all about. Luther thunderously preached grace, and the later Reformers both here and on the Continent explored the depths of his insights into God’s message. As later generations of Roman Catholics, rationalists, and radicals challenged core Reformation truths, the Reformers worked hard to refute their increasingly sophisticated false teaching, especially in their catechisms and confessions (such as the 39 Articles). They handed on to us a pattern of sound teaching and a system of doctrinal alarm bells, so to speak, designed to ring as loudly as possible when grace is under threat. We neglect their hard work to protect us from spiritual danger to our peril.

3. What are the main things you have learned about our reformed evangelical heritage while studying for your PhD?

My PhD is on the Hebrews commentary written by John Owen (1616-1683). People know Owen, if at all, as a great Puritan theologian. But like almost all the great theologians of his era, he wrote not just theology but biblical commentary. That aspect of his and their work has been hugely neglected in the scholarship and consequently in popular perception. So I spend my days reading his mammoth commentary, which at about two million words in length is nearly three times as long as the entire Bible! What’s interesting is that Owen isn’t content with shallow interpretation, or with imposing a piety or a doctrinal framework onto the details of the Bible to smooth out difficulties. Some people assume that is what Reformed theology does. But Owen says he adores the fullness of the scriptures and he shows it by working at the text with the best tools at his disposal, and out-exeging his unorthodox interlocutors along the way. That has been a joy, an encouragement, and a challenge every day. I sometimes wonder if evangelicals in our day, for all our supposed hermeneutical advances, are too content with a “main point” superficiality in our handling of the Bible, and don’t truly reverence what the Articles call “God’s word written” as much as our evangelical forebears did. We are often much more scholastic and driven by logic than they were; Owen would never reduce a whole chapter of the Bible to a seven word big idea, for example (as Thomas Aquinas did to whole books), and then just preach the theme sentence from different angles. There’s much more to say on all this, but perhaps I should write a book... !

4. What can Church Society offer?

Church Society has a very long history of standing up for these truths when it counts. Yes, we lobby against the destructive tides of revisionist liberalism in church and state. Yes, we oppose gospel-obscuring ceremonialism and defective views of salvation by Christ alone. But in our extensive publishing work and our intimate connections to local churches through the patronage responsibilities we hold, we can have a deep and profoundly positive long-term effect on the nation too. I’m sometimes asked, “Why should I join Church Society? What’s in it for me?” Well, in one sense there is nothing in it for you! Being a member of Church Society is not about buying benefits and privileges for ourselves. It’s about the glory of God and the good of England, and we club together as partners in that work because we see the need to do it in fellowship with others. It’s about serving, not being served, as the Master himself put it. I know we’re not the only game in town, but because the Society has a history and a depth to it, there are quite a number of ways to serve, whether that’s by writing in *Churchman* or *Cross†Way* or for *EvNews*, serving on Councils and committees, by giving of time, talents, and treasure, or by using our prayer diary to pray. I’m sure there are advantages to having a full time Director (and over the last 60+ years there have been a number of excellent men at the helm). But Church Society is not a one man band; never has been, never will be. So ask not what Church Society can do for you (though there are many ways it can

help and resource Christians and churches); ask, rather, what you can do for England and the Church of England by stepping off the sidelines and getting involved.

5. What will your passions be as the new Director?

Well, I don't officially start full time as Director until January 2013, but we've already started on some significant new ideas. Our digital strategy, for example, has seen Church Society take up a platform on Facebook and Twitter for the first time, which has strengthened and expanded our connections to a new generation, for whom groups and societies don't exist unless they are enmeshed in the world of social media. Our website is packed full of great stuff, but could perhaps do with a facelift in the coming year, and maybe we can make our resources more accessible to the Kindle-iPad generation. I don't know how long I will be privileged to serve as Director, but when I leave that role I want to make sure I leave the Society in a strong position in every way, particularly in terms of the size and profile of our membership and the quality of contributions being made at every level of our work. (It's a great encouragement to me that the newly elected Council contains people in their 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s, and 70s!) I am passionate about expanding our publishing work and both resourcing and enthusing people through excellent literature, and new things are already in process here. Most of all though, I am looking forward to meeting people on the ground in our Anglican evangelical churches and finding out how we as a Society can better serve them in the years ahead.

Lee Gatiss was interviewed by James Crabtree, Chairman of Church Society Council.