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THE NEED FOR EVANGELICAL COURAGE – Part 2

By Pete Myers

The first part of this article published in the last issue of *Cross†Way* covered the tendency to retreat from the CofE, and her hierarchical structures.

3. Courage not to retreat from reality

Both of the tendencies we've examined so far are given noble gospel-centred justifications, yet in fact neither of them truly defend the gospel but are retreats from the front line. However, no matter whether someone is in the CofE or out of the CofE; whether they never venture beyond their church walls or they are in the upper echelons of Synodical government... the third retreat is the most schismatic, foolish, and requires the most bravery to avoid: this is the ostrich syndrome.

Generally speaking this form of retreat neither helps the cause of Christ, nor protects the sheep in my care: it *simply makes me feel better*, and that is why it is so tempting.

There are a number of ways to retreat from reality, one is **to be so scared of doing something wrong that I never positively suggest a realistic way forwards.**

The current wrangling over women bishops is a prime example of this problem. It is simply too tempting to devote all our energy to criticising the working group, or lamenting about the fact that we're in this situation in the first place, without actually suggesting a workable solution.

To shout loudly that I'm a faithful, confessional Anglican, and that women bishops are wrong, sure does make me *feel* a lot better: but it neither *prevents* women bishops happening, nor ensures *provision* for us who disagree. In fact, simply shouting critically about how its wrong will merely strengthen the hand of those who are trying to bring in women bishops by a single clause measure—by just being negative we're simply hastening the demise of classical Anglicanism.

Bearing in mind that there is a vast majority in the church who want to make women bishops, we must offer constructive and realistic solutions for how they can do that in a way that creates provision for us. To simply criticise *every* suggestion for what provision might look like is nothing but a retreat from reality.

This requires courage in the face of fear. A fear of getting it wrong. A fear of suggesting something that might possibly display a sign of weakness.

As tempting as it is, cowardice simply will not do. It won't protect the gospel, just hasten our demise. Such action is not faithful: it just makes me feel better.

A second type of retreat from reality is **to fearfully retreat from the task of winning over those we disagree with.**

The task Jesus has given our generation is to win over the people who are really here, not to play to the imaginary audience in our heads cheering our resolute faithfulness as we plunge *kamikaze* style into the nearest cathedral.

We must try and winsomely win women clergy over. That means praying for them and with them; encouraging them; loving them; eating with them; laughing with them and crying with them.

The simple fact of the matter is that a large number of those who disagree with us in the CofE think we're bigots. If we are to persuade them to submit to scripture, then we must fight a spiritual battle. Spiritual battles are fought by loving winsomeness: only when many of our opponents truly feel that we love them will they actually listen to what we say.

However, this also requires courage. It makes me feel a lot better to lament and shout about how people must repent and submit to the Bible. If you want to feel better—go ahead and do that. But if you want to make a difference—we must *befriend* our opponents in order to faithfully win people over for Christ.

Of course there will always be an extremist contingent who oppose us no matter what. Thanks to my political work with Together4ward, I get hate mail, and have been unfairly labelled as “Taliban.” I have even written a standard email response I send out when I get yet another email accusing me of being a Nazi.

But this extremist contingent does *not* justify lacking winsomeness in the way I engage. Only when we have gained people's trust will we see people seriously engage with the Biblical case we present them with.

I'm afraid I'm not charismatic enough to believe that revival is something that magically drops from the sky.

A final retreat from reality is driven from an intellectual fear **to avoid the real battle for the sake of fighting a simpler one.**

Our situation in the CofE is complex. There are a huge range of issues upon which we have to contend, and there's no one-size-fits-all approach. This is intellectually daunting.

So, why not just declare a blanket anathema down on everyone? Every error is a denial of the Bible... so every error deserves equal rejection and disassociation. Being faithful means declaring as loudly as I can where everyone else is wrong: how would the church survive without me here to police it?

Or, why not move the debate onto safer territory? I could shout loudly about Gen 1 or eschatology or obscure rules about liturgy, and persuade myself that faithfulness in these matters is the secret *gnosis* to unlocking revival in the church.

But both of these approaches are merely a retreat from reality. Instead, we should follow the examples of the Reformers, and particularly Thomas Cranmer.

Cranmer was a scholar at heart, beginning his career as a lecturer in Cambridge. He applied his great mind as Archbishop of Canterbury and as such chose his battles exceptionally carefully. While working under Henry VIII, there are many confrontations he chose not to have. He got ordained in full mass vestments despite at that stage already being a Lutheran. He didn't shout “heresy” at the publishing of the catholic 10 Articles. He didn't openly refute the catholics under Henry. He never tried to force anyone out of post directly. He kept his wife a secret.

Instead, Cranmer was judicious and subtle. When incumbencies came up, he placed good evangelical men in key positions. He surrounded young Edward with Protestant teachers. He winsomely stayed on good terms with King Henry—a man with essentially Roman Catholic convictions, and a quick temper who fell out with others often—and gently kept pointing him to salvation by faith alone. Cranmer refused to get drawn into the many disputes he could have had.

Instead he deliberately concentrated on making the method of salvation clear, and on tackling the major area of confusion in his day: the Lord's Supper.

We all know the result of Cranmer's work. Under Edward the Protestant Reformation was able to finally flourish, and the changes established then substantially shaped the Protestantism of the Elizabethan settlement.

Cranmer was exceptionally effective and faithful: a faithfulness expressed through being wise. He chose his fights, and he kept the main thing the main thing.

But if Cranmer were here today, how many conservative evangelicals would disavow him and his methods?

Choosing to fight everything in the same way, or to fight irrelevant battles to the problems of the moment, may make us *feel* like brave faithful heroes: but in reality this is a cowardly unfaithful retreat.

If we care about the gospel: we will learn to put things in perspective. If we care about people's souls: we will learn to be winsome. If we care about the future: we will learn how to choose our battles wisely.

We must shed ourselves of the view that standing firm in the faith means clearly disassociating from error by telling everyone where they're wrong. Such a view is *ineffective*. The Bible doesn't support it. Church history doesn't support it.

If we want to see revival in our country, we need to follow Cranmer's example. We need *evangelical courage*:

Courage to stick it out in the CofE. Courage to engage with the CofE structures. Courage to face reality: to be positive, befriend our opponents, and choose our battles judiciously while fighting them wisely.

We young evangelical ministers now have forty years ahead of us to prepare what we're going to hand on to the next generation. Will we live those forty years with courage, or retreat to the safety of just shouting loudly about where everyone is wrong?

Here's the baton. Now run.

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