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STAY IN NOAH'S ARK, OR GET INTO THE LIFEBOAT?

By Matt Graham

I've just completed four years of training for ministry in the Church of England, and, God willing, have ahead of me many years of gospel ministry in the Anglican Church. However, there seems to me to be more pressure than ever to doubt the integrity of that position. How can an evangelical who takes seriously his stewardship of revealed truth, ever with a good conscience take office in the Church of England?

That very current sounding question was actually J I Packer's summary of the same dilemma facing a would-be Anglican ordinand back in 1981. He wrote a short book-length reply to a young man wavering over the possibility of ordained ministry in the Church of England. In it he sets out the principled decision to stay, despite it being theologically mixed. His reply was called *A Kind of Noah's Ark? The Anglican Commitment to Comprehensiveness*.

Given the breadth and doctrinal free-for-all of the Church of England, what Bishop J C Ryle in 1884 called a Noah's ark of every kind of opinion and creed, Packer asks how can evangelicals stay? What makes it possible for them to accept it? Have they ceased to regard faithful stewardship of God's revealed truth as the church's calling, and theirs too? Or are they compromising their principles by ducking the issues? How can they have a good conscience? As Packer stresses, these are proper and pressing questions. No Anglican evangelical can be excused from facing them, or commended if he tries to get along without an answer to them.

During my time at college I have had a change of heart. I went with firm convictions about the power of the gospel to transform lives. I went with a desire to serve the local church and proclaim the living word of God. If anything, those convictions have only been strengthened. My change of heart has been less about the how and what of gospel ministry, and more about the *where*.

If the gospel is true, and powerful to change hearts; if the Lord's promise stands, that his word will not return empty, why not seek to proclaim it in places starved of the word of God? Why not win back the pulpits woefully lacking biblical ministry, for the sake of dear sheep, loved by the saviour, so often without a pastor to care for them faithfully? This is an argument I came across in a provocatively titled book by Mike McKinley called *Church Planting is for Wimps*. In short, why only plant new churches, when in pulpit after pulpit and parish after parish, faithful, patient, word-based, Christ-centred ministry is so desperately needed?

My change of heart has been a growing desire to see this nation reached for Christ, as poor, and even anti-gospel witnesses are transformed into effective displays of God's glory. Yes, we must pray on for church planting too. But I have increasingly been challenged by the biblical burden to grow existing churches, so that the powerful transforming word of God might remind, rebuke, and call to repentance what is lukewarm, dying, or dead.

This is what Jesus does in his letters to the churches in Revelation 2-3, for example. Over time, the gospel is powerful to bring new life, to restore, revitalise, and reform churches. It replaces a false witness and establishes vibrant communities which in turn sound out the gospel to those outside the church.

I have found the biblical burden for church revitalising compelling. But as Anglicans, our ecclesiology also seems to compel us 'to proclaim the gospel afresh in every generation.' The

assumption of the reformers was that this would be necessary. Packer's clarion call to stay, to stand, not compromising but rather contending for the truth, is not one based on rosy hopes for the future. This side of the Lord Jesus' return, the Church of England and every other church faces the constant threat of doctrinal disorder. Jesus promised as much.

But is renewal possible? Without doubt the gospel is powerful to effect change. But is there a way to stay, to make a stand, without losing integrity, without tolerating to the point of compromising the distinctive reformed and evangelical principles of Anglicanism? Or is withdrawal the conscientious man's only option?

In preparation for making my ordination vows I've been encouraged again by Ryle, Packer, and others to see that compromise or withdrawal don't have to be the only options. In those vows, ministers promise to preach from scripture all things necessary for eternal salvation, to pray diligently, and love the flock, being an example to them. To preach, pray, love and stay (as Mike McKinley puts it) in the Church of England, not out of pure pragmatism but on principle and patiently, is a great example to set. It may well be, as Packer calls it, a hard-made decision. But for the sake of the 2 million souls who occupy the pews of 16,000 parish churches up and down the length and breadth of the nation month by month, might it yet again, even today, be the best decision?

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