

GERALD BRAY AT CHURCHMAN: THIRTY YEARS AND COUNTING

By Andrew Atherstone

Three decades ago, in January 1984, the Church Society's theological journal, *Churchman*, was relaunched under new leadership. At a moment of crisis within the Anglican movement, when confusion reigned about the authority and interpretation of Scripture, some were beginning to ask: 'When does neo-evangelicalism become simply a new form of the old liberalism?' (CEN, 6 May 1983). The Church Society council turned to a young tutor at Oak Hill College, Gerald Lewis Bray, to take a lead as *Churchman's* new editor. An expert in patristic theology, with a doctorate from the Sorbonne and a monograph on Tertullian already to his name, Bray was a rising star in the evangelical firmament. He was determined to bring new vigour to the journal: 'orthodoxy can and should be held and proclaimed with passion; it should stir the blood of the faint-hearted and awaken new resources of spiritual life which sleep for want of the sound of the trumpet' (CEN, 6 May 1983). In his first editorial he laid out *Churchman's* theological priorities under his tenure – it was to be clearly evangelical, scholarly, ecclesiastical (speaking 'to the church') and evangelistic: 'we believe that Bible-based Christianity is as relevant today as it has ever been'.

Thirty years on, Gerald Bray is still in harness and has managed to outlast even Sir Alex Ferguson. In the meantime other theological journals have come and gone. *Anvil* was founded in 1984 to express the views of anyone claiming the title of 'evangelical'. It survived until its Silver Jubilee in 2009, but subscriptions dwindled: it wobbled and fell, to be revived instead online – instant blogs, like Fulcrum, have stolen its market. But *Churchman* continues from strength to strength, due primarily to two factors: a robust evangelical perspective and the Bray editorials. Indeed John Pearce (chairman of the Church Society council in the 1980s) observed the main reason for recruiting him to the editor's chair in the first place was 'to get clear-cut editorials'. And Bray has not disappointed. His *Churchman* editorials now number 120 and counting (all recently collected together on the Church Society webpage). In other theological journals, editorials are dull summaries of the contents or innocuous ramblings on contemporary events. But Bray's style is quite different and sets his editorials apart from the crowd. Always incisive and stimulating, sometimes trenchant and deliberately provocative, unafraid to challenge party shibboleths and dispel Anglican confusions, the Bray editorials are a consistent highlight.

Rather than seeing *Churchman* as merely a stepping stone to greater things, Bray has stuck at the task throughout his flourishing career, even as he grew from a precocious young talent to a theological heavyweight of international repute. After a dozen years at Oak Hill College it seemed in 1993 that he might be lost to the Church of England when he transferred across the Atlantic, to work alongside Timothy George at Beeson Divinity School, Alabama, as Anglican Professor of Divinity. Previous conservative evangelical exiles in North America, Philip E. Hughes and James I. Packer, never returned home, to the detriment of Anglican evangelicalism. But Bray was recruited by the Latimer Trust in 2006 as director of research with a roving brief to write, teach, and encourage young theologians, based back in England at Cambridge, a stone's throw from Tyndale House. He remains research professor at Beeson and travels worldwide in high demand as a doctrine lecturer, at the nexus of the academy and the church.

Churchman is just the tip of the iceberg in Bray's prodigious literary output. He writes books and essays faster than many of us can read them, and it is said (surely legendary) that he has never in his life missed a publishing deadline. His bibliography includes textbooks which have become standard for students and pastors, alongside specialist tomes for the ecclesiastical historian. Early volumes include *Creeds, Councils and Christ* (1984), expounding the classic doctrinal statements of the

ecumenical councils in the first five centuries; and *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present* (1996), which was voted one of *Christianity Today's* books of the year. Bray was series edited for IVP's 'Contours of Christian Theology', a set of concise introductions on key topics from prominent evangelical authors, including Sinclair Ferguson on the Holy Spirit, Peter Jensen on revelation, Paul Helm on providence, and Edmund Clowney on the church. Bray himself contributed *The Doctrine of God* (1993), focused on Trinitarian theology, including insights from Eastern Orthodoxy which are often forgotten amongst Protestants.

One of Bray's chief skills is as a critical editor of ancient and inaccessible texts, bringing them within reach of a contemporary audience for the first time. As a linguist he is a master of Latin and French, and is rumoured also to be fluent in German, Dutch, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, Greek and Russian. Is there any European language he does not speak? He has collaborated closely with Professor Thomas Oden in unearthing the wisdom of the early church Fathers to resource theological renewal in the church today. To IVP's series of *Ancient Christian Commentaries*, edited by Oden, Bray has published on Romans (1998), 1 and 2 Corinthians (1999) and the letters of James, Peter, John and Jude (2000). These provide carefully selected comments and homilies on Scripture from patristic authors like John Chrysostom, Augustine of Hippo, Clement of Alexandria, the Venerable Bede, and lesser known figures like Didymus the Blind and Severian of Gabala. Bray and Oden are series editors of IVP's *Ancient Christian Texts*, English translations of full-length patristic commentaries and sermons – currently running to twelve volumes including Origen on Numbers, Eusebius of Caesarea on Isaiah, Jerome on Jeremiah, and Theodore of Mopsuestia on John. Bray himself translated Ambrosiaster, a forgotten Bible teacher, the earliest Latin commentator on all thirteen of Paul's epistles (2 volumes, 2000). To IVP's series on *Ancient Christian Doctrine*, Bray contributed *We Believe in One God* (2009), a survey of patristic comment on the opening clauses of the Nicene Creed: 'We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of Heaven and Earth, of all that is, seen and unseen'. Ever versatile, he has also published the volume on Galatians and Ephesians (2011) in IVP's *Reformation Commentary on Scripture*, edited by Timothy George, a selection of material from Latin, German, Dutch, French and English authors in the sixteenth century. This puts nourishing Reformation material in the hands of English-speaking pastors and preachers for the first time.

Those concerned for the historical foundations of the Anglican Communion have equal reason to value Bray's remarkable capacity as an editor. His *Documents of the English Reformation* (1994), originally compiled for students at Oak Hill, ought to be on the bedside table of every clergyman. With the Church of England Record Society and the Ecclesiastical Law Society he has published *The Anglican Canons 1529-1947* (1998), swiftly followed by *Tudor Church Reform* (2000), containing the Henrician Canons of 1535 and Archbishop Cranmer's *reformatio legum ecclesiasticarum* of 1552. Bray's staggering editorial achievement, perhaps least known to *Churchman* readers, is a critical edition of the entire surviving records of the Convocations of Canterbury, York, Ireland, and Sodor and Man, from the middle ages to the nineteenth century – running to a massive twenty volumes, and retailing at £1,500. For any other scholar, this in itself would be a lifetime's work, but Bray completed the project single-handed in a few short years. More recently with the Latimer Trust he has published an edition of prefaces to English Bible versions, *Translating the Bible: From William Tyndale to King James* (2010). And there are high hopes that he will soon be persuaded to publish a critical edition of the various *Anglican Homilies*, a major desideratum for Anglican readers who want to move beyond old Victorian reprints.

Gerald Bray is no ivory tower academic. These numerous scholarly projects are for the service of the church and the building up of God's people. When he contributes *Churchman* editorials about the contemporary Anglican scene, or popular Latimer Trust booklets like *The Oath of Canonical Obedience* (2004) and *The Faith We Confess: An Exposition of the Thirty-Nine Articles* (2009), we can be confident they are based on deep doctrinal and historical scholarship, distilled for the busy

minister or lay Christian. Bray's current project may yet prove to be one of his most significant. A lifetime of theological reflection has borne fruit in his latest magnum opus, *God Is Love: A Biblical and Systematic Theology* (2012), a goldmine for those keen to mature in their Christian thinking. We eagerly anticipate its companion volume on historical theology, *God Has Spoken*, in 2014. It is a rare privilege, and a delight, to have a theologian of such stature at the helm of *Churchman*. As he enters upon his fourth decade as editor, we say both 'Thank you, Gerald', and 'Thank you God for Gerald'. Keep those editorials coming!

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