

Evangelicals Caught in the Act

by David Phillips

The Episcopal Ministry Act of Synod - an evangelical response.

For many of those who consider the ordination of women as priests to be a grave mistake the other provisions of the legislation are a life line enabling them to remain, albeit with a troubled conscience, in the Church of England. However, for evangelicals these provisions are far from satisfactory. There are a number of facts that need to be borne in mind when considering the evangelical response to the Episcopal Ministry Act of Synod.

Firstly, many of those pushing hardest for women's ordination have called themselves evangelical and claimed that the Bible supports their cause. This has strained or broken bonds that previously united evangelicals.

Secondly, those opposed to the ordination of women disagree on what we oppose. The scriptures not only preclude women presbyters but also women teaching or having authority over men. The admission of women lay-readers and development into lay-preaching was conceded long ago. Many now allow women to preach regularly so long as they are not the 'head' of the congregation. At best this is odd logic, at worst the Incumbent is saying 'she can have authority over everyone, except me'.

Thirdly, the wording of resolutions A and B is not helpful. The terms are alien to evangelicals and seem to express a very different theology of ministry. It is an up-hill task to convince PCCs that the resolutions are necessary.

Fourthly, with regards 'Resolution C', petitioning for alternative episcopal oversight, evangelicals are in a chicken and egg situation. Repeated calls for an evangelical PEV have been turned down because evangelicals have not passed Resolution C. Evangelicals will not pass 'Resolution C' because there is no evangelical PEV. Some of those who have received the ministry of the PEVs speak warmly of it whilst others have opted for alternative oversight but their diocesan bishop has failed to deliver.

Fifthly, most evangelicals recognise that there is a deeper issue. We have witnessed the Church gradually distance itself from our reformed protestant heritage and most particularly from the authority of God's word written. This was happening before and has continued since the ordination of women. We have seen it in bishops who deny the fundamentals of the faith, in lax moral teaching and now in the gradual promotion of homosexual practice. When does the breaking point come? The steady trickle of departures shows that everyone has a different breaking point although there was a greater flow for a while after 1992. There is apparently no shortage of thriving independent congregations looking for godly men to pastor them.

It is the gradual erosion of biblical truth and our Anglican heritage that should be kept in mind as we think about the place of the Episcopal Act of Synod. For years there have been evangelical churches who have flatly refused to let their bishop through the door because the Vicar, as a shepherd, has a duty to keep wolves away from the sheep. I know

of four dioceses where the error of a Bishop (three of them Diocesans) has resulted in parishes looking elsewhere for episcopal oversight. The fault lies with those who have appointed those as bishops who are not fit for the task. Since there appears to be little recognition of this as an issue then it is hard to see things getting better. Thus the horrors of North America beckon us with all the welcome of the grim reaper. In ECUSA faithful congregations are shut out of churches, there has been fraud on a large scale, a complete breakdown between bishop and Diocese, churches seeking oversight from overseas, excommunication, division and break aways and the threat of separation by other Anglican primates. The catalogue of problems in ECUSA should not be seen as scaremongering but rather as a salutary warning of what can happen when the leadership of a Church look only to themselves for authority and inspiration, it is inevitable result of liberalism.

What will protect the Church of England from such a future? The more that power is centralised the greater the danger. But there are, humanly speaking, at least two things that may yet save us. Oddly enough the first is the General Synod. The Episcopal Act of Synod must be seen as a recognition by many that they may have bitten off more than they can chew. It is an acceptance that 'Synods do err' ('and often do', I usually add). When you separate yourself from 2,000 years of Church history you ought to do so with a degree of self examination. So long as there is this humble willingness to review there is hope.

The second protection is Establishment. The English system of Church government developed into an elaborate mechanism of checks and balances. In this the role of Parliament is to protect the people of England from clerical power. Being thoroughly reformed our forbears recognised that 'total depravity' stretches even to Bishops and Clergy (and especially Popes!). Since all are prone to error and sin, a system of Church government must recognise this and provide safeguards against it. No doubt the Church Assembly and General Synod should have taken over this role from Parliament but the pressure to adopt the party line is almost unassailable. The creation of the Archbishops' Council and proposals for change in synodical government could be disastrous for nature of the Church of England as a church of the people. I doubt if many MPs recognise their role in all this, but it is heartening that the Ecclesiastical Committee clearly do.

Without the Episcopal Act of Synod the Church of England has but a bleak future. Decline, error, division and all the other things we see in ECUSA will be ours for the taking. The dominant ideology of our Church is that reason is supreme, the Act ensures that those who reject this position can remain and at the same time protects the Church from its leadership.

What should evangelicals do? Many of us will leave as things get worse. We may take matters into our own hands, as our forbears often did, consecrating our own Bishops and ensuring that our money is given to worthwhile gospel work rather than to prop up erroneous Dioceses. In the long term all this may be necessary but at the moment it is too radical for many and PCCs would be wise make use of the Act and petition for alternative oversight. There is no strict form of words laid down and therefore so long as it contains

certain key elements the resolution can be broader. Those who are loathe to petition their Bishop, thereby giving him a status they reject, should address the petition to their Archbishop but should retain 'and the diocesan' in order to match the suggested wording from the guidelines. I make the following, tentative suggestion:

“That this parochial church council, recognising the supreme authority of Holy Scripture and also the historic formularies of the Church of England and also recognising that it is the duty of a Bishop ‘to teach and uphold sound and wholesome doctrine, and to banish and drive away all erroneous and strange opinions’ therefore resolves to petition the (Archbishop of _____ and the) diocesan bishop to arrange for episcopal duties to be carried out in the parish in accordance with the Episcopal Ministry Act of Synod 1993.”