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A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

The Gospel and the National Church

BY JOHN TIARKS

“**P**ROCLAIMING the Gospel” as a phrase is capable of a wide and a narrow understanding. I take it in the former sense—that is, taking the good news of Christ’s redemption of men and society, the Gospel of the wholeness of life, into the national scene. This, of course, includes the more limited meaning of formal preaching. The second part of my title is precise—“the National Church.” “The Church of England as by law established,” a recognizable constituent of the body politic.

The question is at once raised whether it is possible to keep together church and nation in England in the remarkable nexus which history has provided. For the establishment in this country was never arrived at as a logical conclusion of a theory but evolved in the process of time. The Church of England has for centuries been so intimately connected with the life of the English people that we can say that the English church gave birth to the English nation. The English church established the English state. There were once seven kingdoms in England but only one church. This is the fact of history which establishment expresses in legal form and on which it bestows official recognition. The Church of England, by its history, even more than by its legal position has a mission to every Englishman who does not reject its ministry by active membership of another religious body (it is this which explains Anglicanism which in origin is simply the extension of this ministry to every land where Englishmen have gone, whether with commerce or the flag).

Since the Elizabethan settlement much water has flowed under the bridges—or perhaps more accurately, many bridges have gone under the water! And since 1919 there has been the sensible adaptation of the relationship between church and state which allows the church to order its own affairs subject only to the veto of the Crown in Parliament. I believe that the mood of parliament and people to-day is highly favourable to the present *modus vivendi*—and I think it will increasingly be so—and that for the future, when the church has fully made up its mind on the ordering of its life and formally recorded it through Convocation and Church Assembly, parliament will not again find itself compelled to say no. How much stronger this expectation will be if there comes into being a national synod in which the laity as of right have a full voice in matters of doctrine, order, and discipline. The one absolutely necessary change in the church’s set-up is the creation of this national synod and the abolition of the power of veto proposed to be granted to the Convocations under the present proposals for synodical government.

Perhaps it needs to be added that the establishment might well be strengthened rather than weakened by the union of the Church of England and the Methodist Church—and ultimately of the Free Churches in the main stream of the Christian tradition. Certainly the effect of the proposed Anglican-Methodist union on the establishment needs to be clearly worked out so that the strengthening of the establishment may be assured.

I lay stress on the full participation of the laity of the church in

the governing of the church, not only because this will be seen to be a sensible and right replacement of the lay voice in parliament, but because it is a true church principle. It needs to be added that a proper revulsion from erastianism tends to mean a swing to clericalism, which has had a very long run in the Church of England. Both erastianism and clericalism are, in the words of Bishop Hensley Henson, "morbid expressions of opposed types and both are historically discredited by hideous scandals. On balance I find erastianism less profoundly hostile to human self-respect than its more pretentious rival." And he adds characteristically: "St. Paul was well advised when he refused to go up to Jerusalem for judgment by the High Priest and preferred to take his chance with Nero at Rome". Certain it is that the Church of England is gradually being immensely strengthened in its formal relationship with the state by the ever growing expression of the lay mind. It needs only the proper integration of the laity into the government of the church in a national synod to persuade the state to give the church the freedom which it should have to order its own life.

It is, of course, well known that a large number of church people (perhaps mostly clergy, and of them perhaps the majority are more ardent in attendance at conferences than in pastoral duty) still believe, in spite of the Enabling Act, that (in the words of the Resolution which was propounded at the original "Life and Liberty" meeting in 1917) "the present conditions under which the church lives and works constitute an intolerable hindrance to its spiritual activity". (The hall today is full of parochial clergy and I venture to doubt whether in terms of daily ministry any one of them would subscribe to that sentiment.) So let me put in a corrective saying of F. D. Maurice that "the state is as much God's creation as the church". He does not mean that they are equal but that both are under God. The church which has a gospel for the whole of life must have some relationship with the state which is responsible for the preservation and good ordering of the life of the nation. The fact that in our own day the temper of the nation has become more secular, more dominated by technology, and more committed to seeing itself as a community, underlines the need for a counter-balance of the other God-created community, the church, with its witness that man belongs to a spiritual order, the kingdom of God, superior to both church and state. The English version of this necessary relationship is perhaps unique in the world and came about by a natural evolution of historical process which may not be very different from saying that it was divinely initiated. It has been the working out in the life of one part of Christendom and of one nation of the analogy of the leaven propounded by our Lord Himself as He sought to explain the vocation of the church to the world. The analogy of leaven means essentially that all that is best in a community is concentrated in a minority whose function is to activate the majority—a principle which applies in every department of human life. The *ideal* of a national church (we know full well how far our church has fallen short of the ideal) is to be as it were the religious élite of the nation, not in a pharasaic but in an apostolic sense. Its function is to produce in its own life the Christian faith

at its best, as an exemplar to the whole nation. If that be so there is nothing intrinsically absurd in saying that a church which is numerically small in relation to the total population may still be regarded as truly national and representative. From the side of the state, itself an instrument created by God, it is logical that it should allow such a church a defined status in the national life, especially when the state has historically derived its ethos and character and traditions from that church.

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I will add only this on the question of the Church of England as the national church. Let it be conceded that the church is exposed to peculiar temptations and compulsions, that it has great advantages and great disadvantages, but actual disestablishment is a very different thing from a theoretical disbelief in establishment. The act of disestablishment would separate the church from the nation more definitely and more irretrievably than if it had never been established. Disestablishment would be much more than a recognition of a situation which (chiefly on the basis of statistics of church attendance) was believed to exist; it would create a situation the results of which could not be foreseen, for either the church would be thought to have abandoned the nation, or the state would be seen to throw over the Christian faith. The church might well become one sect among many and the nation avowedly and openly pagan.

There are many who affirm that it is so already. I venture to disagree. Over the centuries the Church of England has had a more profound influence in shaping the character of a nation than any other church and I do not believe for a moment that this has yet spent itself. There are obvious signs of a general apathy towards religious observance and of consequent moral decadence, but history seems to show that the English people have a remarkable aptitude for concealing from the world their deepest qualities and most tenaciously held beliefs—until the moment of testing. The most recent illustration of this was seen as recently as 1940 in time of war. In terms of religion the English people still live in an atmosphere of general, if unexpressed, belief.

Voltaire was once walking with a friend through the French countryside and when they came to a crucifix at a cross-roads they fell to silence and Voltaire raised his hat. When they had gone further on the road he replaced his hat and said, "we salute but we do not speak". This is the attitude of the essential Englishman towards the Christian faith. However unsatisfactory this may be, with the risk of its acting as a sort of vaccination against the possibility of a living, active faith ever being caught, the Church of England has never despised the smallest seed of incipient belief and is not ashamed of the title of "the apostolate of the indevious."* It would not disagree with Brunner's words that "the boundaries of the church face to face with the world must remain invisible to the eyes of men". For "who can establish criteria to judge whether or not the Holy Spirit is really active in a human heart to which God is only just beginning to reveal himself?"

No one will deny that there are anomalies in the relationship of the church with the state, but it does not follow that the establishment

* A. Fawcett 'Shall we disestablish?' (1928) p. 37.

should be liquidated as soon as possible. I believe it to be in the purpose of God that perhaps in our lifetime a union between the Church of England and some, if not all, of the Free Churches should be achieved. In that case, a new ecclesiastical settlement would obviously follow, but I believe it is still for the good of both church and state that there should continue the kind of formal relationship that has existed ever since our people came to nationhood, for each is necessary to the well-being of the other.

The established church has a privileged position; equally it has a greater responsibility towards the people of England than any other church. The consequence of a belief in the establishment is an inescapable duty to take the Gospel to the people. This duty is defined more closely by the existence of the parochial system, so that every clergyman (and his people with him) knows that he has a precise local responsibility. He and they have a duty not to the nation in general, but to that particular bit of it living within a precise boundary marked on a map.

I have heard it said that the parochial system broke down years ago, but I have never accepted it as true in any parish where I have served. I hope I may be pardoned for the intrusion of personal experience. Before I became a diocesan bishop some three years ago, I served in the industrial north over a period of 35 years, in six different parishes, in stretches varying from three years to eighteen years, with populations varying from 5,000 to 30,000. In every parish, by calling lay people to a shared responsibility, together we ensured that every house which did not specifically owe allegiance to another church, was visited by a member of the parish church regularly and by the same member for a long period. This may not be "proclaiming the Gospel", though often it was undoubtedly just that, but it was a necessary pre-condition. It was at least the steady building of a bridge of personal confidence and friendship between church and people. Its aim was not primarily to preach or to judge, but to understand, and this is the true starting point of all evangelism.

The acceptance of this responsibility to the parish is applied differently in different situations and there are endless variations of method, but even if it is only partial and shows no signs of visible success it remains an inescapable responsibility and it transforms the life of the worshipping community. It is the congregation that refuses to accept responsibility of this kind that earns Max Warren's description as "a coterie of grimly spiritual persons devoted to the contemplation of sonorous generalities". There comes "the unmistakable sound of the death rattle in the pulpit and the steady progress of *rigor mortis* in the pew".

Some little time ago I visited a mental hospital in my diocese to speak to the nursing staff. Before the meeting I was taken for a few minutes into the secretary's office and there on the wall my eye caught sight of a framed legend. It was headed "Factors causing institutional neurosis", and underneath the three factors were given as (1) loss of contact with the outside world; (2) enforced idleness, and (3) bossiness of the staff. Many of our congregations are deeply afflicted with institutional neurosis. They make no contact with the

outside world, they take up no positive task, they allow the clergy to dominate them. And thus the church fails both to find its own life and to serve its community.

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The parish is a microcosm of the state as the local congregation is a microcosm of the church. It is first in the local situation that the function of a national church becomes clear. If the local Anglican congregation behaves like an episcopalian sect or a gathered church it abdicates its responsibility to its parishioners. There are only two basic commands of Christ to those who would give themselves to Him—"come to Me" and "go into the world". The church's true calling is to "continue steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, the breaking of bread, and the prayers", and then to go out into the world to exhibit in every possible way the enrichment of life that is centred on the Gospel of redemption and which grows in the fellowship of the church.

The commands of Christ to "come" and "go" mean that we come as individuals, even if within a family group, but we go as a community. In evangelism we cannot evade the person-to-person relationship, but what Christ founded was not an order of preachers but a community, a church. In an age of collectivism and nationalism we need to recover the sense of the church being the divine collective. It is not only a community into which men and women come. It is also a community which must penetrate the other communities in which it is set. This is perhaps the most urgent opportunity confronting the church in this country today, when the new groupings that have emerged in an industrialized and technological society, more and more colour and dominate the lives of those who are caught up in them. The conversion of the individual often tends to isolate him from his working environment and thus to destroy any Christian influence he might have. Of course, he must give personal witness to his faith at every opportunity, but his first task as a Christian within a non-Christian group is to understand the community into which he has gone and to interpret it to the church to which he returns. He is, with other Christians, to be a bridge-builder between the community of the church and the community of the working world. The great need is for two-way traffic between the church and the world, and the bridge must be built from the side of the church so that the holiness, which being in touch with Christ and life in the church gives, is carried over into the world in the form of what Maritain called "a secular form of sanctity"—a holiness which is at home in the working world—a holiness which while it condemns (as holiness always must) begins the work of the redemption of societies and men in their own situations.

The function of the church in the world today, as always, is to uplift a crucified Lord that He may draw all men to Himself. The function of the national church in England is to do just that in the particular setting of both history and geography in which it finds itself. The crucial question about the relationship of church and state is not about the freedom of the church to do what it likes, but about its obedience to God's calling and its understanding of and involvement with the nation which it exists to serve.