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

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

Churchman

EDITORIAL

Doing the Lambeth Walk

The next Lambeth Conference is upon us and so far it looks less like a conference of church leaders than like a high-society ball, where the guest list is more important than the event itself. Who has been invited and who will actually go? Earlier this year the primates' meeting in Tanzania agreed that the American Episcopal church had until the end of September to put its house in order, failing which 'serious' consequences would follow. What those consequences might be was not spelled out, but since the only form of sanction was exclusion from the Lambeth Conference, it was generally assumed that the Americans would not be invited if they did not meet the deadline. As it was also pretty clear that they would not change their position in any fundamental way, it seemed reasonable to conclude that they would be absent. But as things turned out, the Archbishop of Canterbury issued his invitations some months before the deadline, and the Americans were on the guest list, apart from Gene Robinson, the practising homosexual Bishop of New Hampshire, who was omitted because of the scandal his presence would cause to other bishops in the Anglican Communion.

It is true that one or two other bishops were left off the list because they were supporters of totalitarian regimes or dubiously consecrated, but little attention has been paid to them. The only one who has mattered is Gene Robinson, who has polarised the Anglican Communion to a degree unknown since John Henry Newman wrote Tract XC. Some liberal American bishops balked at Robinson's exclusion, but they were persuaded to stay on board after receiving private assurances that if Robinson turned up to Lambeth uninvited he would be allowed in. It would not be in anyone's interest to allow him to play the victim in front of the cameras outside the conference hall, and even those who objected most strongly to his presence might be persuaded to accept him as a participant once they realised that the alternative was worse.

Not surprisingly, some of the primates have seen through this deception and announced that their churches would not be attending, though it is still

unclear what will happen when the time comes. Rumour has it that there may be a kind of shadow Lambeth, meeting concurrently with the official Conference and challenging its right to represent the Anglican Communion as a whole. Such a development would cause acute difficulties for conservative bishops in liberal churches, who would be put under strong pressure to conform to the liberal agenda regardless of their personal sympathies. We can be fairly confident that the Evangelical bishops of the Church of England will swallow whatever principles they have left and go along with the majority, though some of them may be bold enough to vote 'no' to some of the wilder Conference resolutions, especially if the ballot is secret. Courage under fire is not their strong point, and in England open resistance to the liberal agenda is most likely to come from high churchmen who are not afraid to stand by their beliefs.

The Evangelical Australians and the conservative Americans will doubtless be more robust—indeed, it is not impossible that if an alternative Conference is held, it will be under their leadership. We must not forget that some of the strongest opposition to the liberals has come from conservative elements in the Episcopal Church, who are fighting for their survival against the tolerant inclusiveness of the majority which is determined to impose its will on everyone at home and abroad.

Behind all the politicking about who can and cannot attend the Lambeth Conference there lies a deeper issue that has not been addressed and that will not be resolved in July 2008, even if someone has the courage to raise it. What really divides the Anglican Communion is not the homosexual question but the doctrine of the church. To the organisers of the Lambeth Conference, the church is essentially a body that consists of duly consecrated bishops, who pastor their canonically ordained clergy, who in turn minister to their properly baptised flocks. What these bishops, clergy and people think, say or do is of secondary importance. There may be extreme cases that require some form of discipline, but this falls most heavily on those who go beyond the recognised boundaries of church order. A bishop who travels half way across the world to ordain dissident clergy in someone else's diocese, or clergy who plant churches in other parishes are liable to face censure, but not those who have entered into same-sex civil partnerships or who deny the existence of God. The reason for this is that the former type of transgression is objectively demonstrable,

whereas the latter only concerns matters of truth and falsehood. In the postmodern age in which we live, truth has been effectively privatised and is therefore purely subjective.

Whether God exists or not is less important than whether I am being authentic in the expression of my beliefs and experience; if I am, then it does not make any difference whether I call that authenticity ‘God’ or not. Of course there is much to be said for the view that an honest atheist is preferable to a dishonest evangelist, but whether either of them should be bishops in the church is another matter. This is where Anglicans differ—liberals see nothing much wrong with the rejection of traditional beliefs by members of the hierarchy whereas conservatives see it as a fundamental problem which the church must overcome if it is to survive and retain any credibility.

On the conservative side are those who believe that the church is essentially a gathering of men and women who confess the same faith. They do not object to hierarchical structures as such, but see them as means to an end and not the end itself. Bishops, clergymen or lay people who do not confess this common faith are not members of the church in good standing, whatever certificates and formal qualifications they may have. To people who think of the church in this way, it makes no sense to say that Christians who believe that homosexual practice is in accordance with the will of God have as much right to be heard as their opponents, because people who think that are not really Christians at all. As conservatives see it, orthodox belief is not an option for church members, but the foundation of belonging to the body of Christ.

This division cuts across party lines, although it is probably true that at the present time most of those who put belief before ritual are Evangelicals, so much so that we are sometimes surprised to discover others in the church who share our outlook. However it is fair to say that most Evangelicals are prepared to acknowledge all those who confess the truth of the gospel as brothers and sisters in Christ, whatever else they may disagree about. This can be seen quite clearly when the Pope criticises the Archbishop of Canterbury and other Anglican leaders for the way in which they are prepared to tolerate non-biblical standards in the church. We are not papists and do not accept the bishop of Rome’s authority over Christendom as a whole, but when John Paul II told Rowan Williams what he thought about the consecration of Gene

Robinson, we know whose side we were on and why. The Pope was standing up for the truth when the Archbishop did not seem to know what that was, and we responded accordingly.

Evangelicals have always believed that trying to hold a church together on any basis other than that of the truth will never work. This was the real reason that the Protestant Reformation led to permanent divisions in the church. Corruption in the hierarchy and excessive papal claims played their part, but they were not the heart of the matter. Not even the false teaching which had crept into the church over the centuries was ultimately decisive. Corruption and false teaching are almost always present somewhere or other in the church, because we are sinful human beings who do not live up to the standards God has set for us. What made the divisions of the Reformation inevitable was not the church's errors but the refusal of those responsible to recognise them, repent and put matters right. Instead of doing that, the papacy tried to silence objectors and when that failed, instigated a reform of its own which cleaned up a few of the worst abuses but also reinforced the false teaching which had allowed them to flourish.

Something similar seems to be happening in the Anglican Communion at the moment. Bishops are busy claiming authority over the church by virtue of their office, and not because of the moral authority which comes from the defence and exposition of the church's official teachings. The effects of this were dramatically revealed recently in the case of an ordinand who refused to take communion with a bishop who publicly supports "Changing Attitude" (a campaigning homosexual organisation). This ordinand was being faithful to the truth, whereas the bishop who refused to ordain him because of his conscientious stand is living in denial of it. By wielding his authority in this way the bishop has discredited his office because he has dismissed as irrelevant the truth of the Christian faith which he is sworn to uphold.

It is entirely typical of this kind of person that he cannot understand the strength of the opposition which he is facing. For someone to whom everything is relative and there is no objective standard of truth, principled opposition is just obstinacy and very likely it is based on ignorance of postmodern values. This is why the liberal bishops, led by Canterbury himself, have recently called for further study of hermeneutics. They have perceived (quite rightly) that the

way we read the Bible determines our approach to questions of belief, and they know that unless they can convert their opponents to a postmodern hermeneutic of Scripture, opposition to it (and to them) will continue unabated. In a speech delivered in Toronto in April 2007, the Archbishop of Canterbury did not hesitate to describe those who disagreed with his approach to reading the Bible as ‘theologically inept and rootless’. He was careful to castigate extreme liberals along with the so-called ‘fundamentalists’ (for which read ‘conservative Evangelicals’), but as the liberals he describes are usually not members of the church and do not claim to be Christians, this apparent balance is fictitious. The guns are aimed at the orthodox believers, whose position is caricatured and dismissed in the name of ‘fairness’. Others have been even more direct. The new Archbishop of Armagh, for instance, has gone on record as saying that division is a greater sin than heresy—an absurdity which does not become any more acceptable by being attributed to the late Archbishop William Temple. Speaking recently about the empty tomb of Jesus, he lapsed into allegory and said the following about the stone which must now be rolled away before new life in Christ can vivify the church—

Biblioatry is a boulder threatening to obscure the dynamic and contemporary truth of the resurrection. It is also the mother of dogmatic fundamentalism. Love for the Scriptures is tainted when Scripture and not God becomes the object of worship.

The idea that the life of Christ is being blocked by people who supposedly turn the Bible into an object of worship is laughable, but this is how the liberal establishment sees those who are faithful to what the Scriptures teach. For them, the resurrection is not so much an historical event (they are divided on this point) as a contemporary experience shared by all who accept their relativism. They cannot understand that Scripture is a proclamation of Christ rooted and grounded in historical events, of which the resurrection is the most decisive. It is a summons to repentance and obedience in faith to what God has done. Christians preach this message on the assumption that it is objectively true—Christ did rise from the dead in historical time and is alive for evermore. His gospel is the same yesterday, today and forever. It is contemporary not because it has been allegorised to fit the spirit of the age but because it is the eternal and unchanging answer to the permanent condition of sinful humanity.

Between this view and that of the liberals, no compromise is possible. We are not talking here about a disagreement between Christians, but between those who believe in the historical Christ and those who transmute the language of that belief into something else. If the Anglican Communion can accept that this is its fundamental problem, there may be a chance that the Lambeth Conference, or whatever takes its place, will bring a new clarity to the discussion and offer some hope that the faith once delivered to the saints will triumph over the delusions of our time which have captured so many Anglican leaders in recent years.

As Evangelical believers who want to remain faithful to the Bible we can only hope and pray that it will be so. We are confident that God will honour the witness of his faithful people in the years to come as he has unfailingly done in the past. It is our prayer that he will do so within the Anglican Communion and not apart from it, and that the heritage which has meant so much to us and to all who love the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity and truth will continue to shine and be fruitful in the lives of generations yet unborn.

GERALD BRAY