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The Bible and Anglican Piety

Following up the Lambeth Conference

BY RONALD WILLIAMS

THE first of the five main subjects discussed at the Lambeth Conference in 1958 was the Bible—its authority and message. I myself had the privilege of serving on the Committee which prepared the report on this subject. Our distinguished Chairman was the Archbishop of York and his deep theological insight made a great contribution to the work and subsequent findings of the Committee, and eventually of the Conference. It is not necessary here to go over again the ground which was covered in the Report, for this has been widely read and studied. The final resolution on the subject, however, was Resolution 12, which called on the Churches of the Anglican Communion to engage in a special effort during the next ten years to deepen the quality and extend the scope of both personal and corporate study of the Bible.

In January of this year the Convocation of Canterbury unanimously accepted a resolution of my own, seconded by Canon Sansbury of St. Augustine's, Canterbury, in which we called upon the dioceses of the Province of Canterbury to do their best to implement the special resolution of Lambeth on the next ten years.

It can be said already that the resolution has not fallen entirely on deaf ears. Response has perhaps been more marked in some of the overseas dioceses than in England. In Canada, for instance, the Bishop of Huron has taken up the matter in a big way and the resources of the Bible Reading Fellowship in England have been taxed to the utmost in order to provide him with the material he needed for a great campaign of personal Bible reading. The Church of Australia is planning a special Bible year in 1962, taking as its starting point the tercentenary of the Authorized Version of the Bible and the publication of the New Testament in the new revision. The primary motive of the campaign in Australia will not be so much the commemoration of a past event as the re-enthusing of the Church with the message and power of the Bible.

In England there have been some encouraging signs. I know of at least two diocesan Conferences which have devoted (or will devote) sessions to this subject (those of Hereford and Lincoln) and there may well be others. In the Diocese of Hereford all Rural Deanery Chapters have been addressed by one of their Prebendaries, and a valuable scheme of study for the clergy drawn up and circulated. The Bible Reading Fellowship has noticed a considerable increase in the circulation of its various publications and feels encouraged to press ahead with a number of new ventures aimed at meeting the new needs which are everywhere apparent. The Scripture Union, which for so long has provided the introduction to Bible reading for so many, continues its wide-ranging work. From time to time I see boys and girls at my Confirmations wearing the Scripture Union badge. I always comment

on it when shaking hands with them and ask them whether they have read their passage for the day ! Many of them have been drawn into the Scripture Union by branches at their schools or in Crusader classes. All this is encouraging.

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It would, however, in my view be a mistake to think that a little ripple on the surface of the Church's life is sufficient of itself to alter the direction of the main current. Although it is extremely difficult to form definite and objective views, many of us have a hunch that the total amount of Bible reading in the Church at large is disappointingly small. Scraps of definite evidence can be quoted in order to give some scientific basis for this opinion. The most definite information I have comes from a book, *The Communication of Ideas*, by T. Cauter and J. S. Downham, published a few years ago. It is based on a well-conducted Social Survey in the town of Derby, a fairly typical provincial city. Their findings reveal that out of 1,200 people interviewed, 11 per cent claimed to read the Bible frequently, 6 per cent fairly often, and 59 per cent never. 24 per cent claimed to be occasional readers. It was surprising and challenging to find that as between the various Churches the Church of England scored the largest percentage of nevers (62 per cent), the Roman Catholics the next largest (54 per cent), and the Free Churches the lowest (51 per cent). The inverse proportion was found among the frequent readers : 8 per cent Church of England, 18 per cent Free Church, and 14 per cent Roman Catholic.

The figures are, of course, influenced by the fact that the Church of England, being the Established Church, carries the largest number of nominal members. This should not divert our minds from the seriousness of the problem as far as the Church of England is concerned. We have recently had a shock in the form of the poor standard of Bible knowledge revealed in applicants for membership of a Church Training College for Teachers, and quite apart from these definite items of news, all clergy who think about the matter will agree that definite and intelligent interest in biblical matters is found among only a few of their people. Anglican piety, such as it is, has come to revolve round other matters. Many of these are entirely admirable—more frequent Communion, new liturgical observances and customs, house-to-house visitation, new forms of publicity, church building and so on. It would be wrong to try to grade these matters into any definite order. They all have their place. Nevertheless, some of us believe that without a settled habit of Bible reading on the part of the people, the quality of Christian discipleship is bound to be poor. The effect on preaching is disastrous because where there is little knowledge there is little stimulus to the preacher to draw deeply from his own resources of biblical knowledge and insight. He has to spend all his time evoking what little interest he can instead of coming to an audience hungry for what he has to give.

The reasons for this lack of personal Bible reading are of course many. Perhaps the most important is the abundance of cheap reading material pouring out every day from the newspaper presses and from publishing firms. Another difficulty is the fact that reading material

is provided for the masses in forms which make practically no intellectual demand upon them and to concentrate even on a few verses of small print in slightly archaic language is more than most people can accomplish unless their hearts have been very definitely warmed so that they have a spiritual taste for God's Message through His Word.

Tides are moving, however, in ways which in the end should bring about a real improvement. One such tide is the increasing interest in what is called Biblical Theology in almost all sections of the younger clergy. While this is nothing new in the Evangelical world many who would not wish to claim that name are aware of the importance of the Bible and its fundamental attitudes as formative of the doctrine and liturgical practice of the Church. It must be noticed that the Roman Catholic Church on the Continent is going ahead by leaps and bounds in a newly-found zeal for the popularizing of Bible knowledge. The Roman Catholics in France for instance are making wide use of a book known as the *Missel biblique*, a kind of handbook for the Mass in which the biblical material is clearly set out and explained. They are also going ahead with popular brochures set out in large print with attractive illustrations opening up biblical themes. I have one of these myself called *Bible et Natur* in which the bearing of the biblical message on man's attitude to nature, the soil and so on, is clearly brought out. On bookstalls of French Churches (I saw one myself at Sacré Cœur) cheap Gospels and New Testaments are on sale; indeed, it may come as a shock to my readers if I say that the French Roman Catholic Church shows much more zeal for personal Bible reading than does the Church of England.

Occasionally one has a pleasant surprise. I was visiting recently the wonderful old Norman Church at Melbourne, a great showplace and not, as far as I know, particularly "Evangelical". On the litany desk at the front of the nave a good copy of the Bible was open with an arrow pointing to the Gospel for the week and a nice card quoting the Sunday in question and giving the exact passage set for the week. Whether in practice many tourists would take the trouble to read it no one can say, but at any rate there was a pointed suggestion that valuable truth was to be had for the asking from the Word of God. I think this idea is worth pursuing, particularly in Churches which have many visitors.

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The hardest thing in any article of this kind is to indicate practical lines of progress and advance. These things cannot really be organized. They depend on the wind of the Spirit and the response of men and women to His Call. However, it may be worth mentioning the kind of things which continually need attention if an effective biblical ministry is to be maintained and an effective habit of Bible reading re-introduced into the ordinary habits of reasonably devout Anglicans.

First of all, of course, the parson himself must be a man of the Bible. He must keep up his studies so that he remains in touch with up-to-date theological thought and research. He cannot expect to provide a forty-year Ministry on three years' study at his Theological College.

More important, he must wrestle with the Bible day by day until he succeeds in drawing from it spiritual food and stimulus for himself,

some of which he will be able to pass on to his people. It is surprising what opportunities present themselves for the passing on of insights into biblical truth once the insights have been gained! In pastoral visitation there will often be opportunities for the reading or quoting of short passages from Scripture with a definite application to the personal situation in which parishioners find themselves. I suspect that the reading of the Bible in pastoral visitation is much less done than was once the case. Here is somewhere where we can all make new experiments for ourselves. Confirmation candidates can be trained in habits of personal Bible reading and there are excellent courses especially prepared by the Bible Reading Fellowship for this purpose. Steps can be taken to make the liturgical readings, the Gospel, Epistle, Psalms, and lessons tell more fully than they often do. New Translations of the Bible can be brought into service for this purpose. Although I personally am fully satisfied with the Authorized Version and find its rhythms like organ music to my ears, I must admit that where I have heard Lessons read from Versions like those of J. B. Phillips and Ronald Knox I have felt quite sure that the people were getting something that they do not usually get from our normal Lesson-reading. Corporate study of the Bible by groups of keen people can be used to build up a nucleus in a congregation which has some appetite for biblical knowledge and those ears have been sensitized to benefit from the public reading and exposition of Holy Scripture. Expository sermons can play a part but experience teaches me that it is not enough simply to resume expository sermons as though once they were delivered their effectiveness were assured. We have to do a great deal today to stimulate interest and if we try to provide material too far in advance of the stage which our hearers have reached we shall, in the end, do more harm than good.

I do not want any of these suggestions to be taken dogmatically or as though I thought they were final answers to our problem. If I have succeeded in stimulating thought and experiment along these lines I shall feel that I have done just a little to help forward the cause that we had in mind at Lambeth when we called on the Church for a new and special effort during this decade. It is humbling to think that nearly two years have gone by since Lambeth. If we are going to get far during the decade we shall have to move more quickly than we have so far.