

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

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

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

The Epistle to the Hebrews and the Decline of Anglicanism

Dennis Peterson

We are in days of greater ecclesiastical confusion than for almost 200 years, and it is estimated that the Churches are losing members at the rate of 2200 a week of whom 1000 are under fifteen. According to Archbishop Dr George Carey, the Anglican Church is within a generation of extinction. The decline has been eating away at the Churches since around the year 1900. It has accelerated in the last decade and there is no sign whatever that it is levelling out.

Those who are seriously concerned about the imminent collapse of our Church, should consider the following serious grounds for concluding that much of the vast structure has fatal flaws. If these grounds are valid and are not remedied, extinction is inevitable.

The awesome voice of God

According to Hebrews the Christian faith is not open to speculation or to modification. God has spoken to us in a final way through the Son who formed the universe and sustains everything by the word of his power; the One who expresses the substance of God and demonstrates his character (Heb 1:1-3).

We must pay the closest attention to what we have heard lest we drift away, step aside or mishear it. What the Son says is more firmly established than anything that has been said by any other messenger, even angels. Thus there is no escape for those who neglect so great a salvation and we should be frightened of falling short of his promises (Heb 2:1-3).

But what has happened and who is worried?

Serving two masters

There are two main systems of theology in our Church today demonstrated by the two radically different communion services in *Common Worship*: one based on Scripture alone and another that has modified that basis to accord with Catholic traditions, many of which stem from the Latin Vulgate translation of the Bible which was made in the fourth century by Jerome.

In the Epistle to the Hebrews, Jerome made some serious mistranslations with far reaching consequences. In crucial places he changed the tenses when translating the Greek aorist which should normally be rendered as the simple past.

Comparing a translation of the Greek with the Douay-Rheims English translation of the Vulgate we note:

Hebrews 1:3 (NIV): ‘...after he had provided purification (aorist) for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the majesty in heaven’ became in the Vulgate ‘... making purgation of our sins, sitteth...’

Hebrews 7:27 (NIV): ‘He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself’ is rendered ‘for this he did once, in offering himself’.

Hebrews 8:3: ‘Every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices: hence it is necessary that this man had (NEB margin respecting the aorist) something to offer’ became ‘...wherefore it is necessary that he should have something to offer’.

Hebrews 10:12 (NIV): ‘But when this priest (ie Christ) had offered (aorist) for all time one sacrifice for sins he sat down on the right hand of God’ became ‘But this man offering one sacrifice for sins, for ever sitteth...’

For 1100 years the Churches believed uncritically that, in heaven, Christ is continually offering for our sins. It is easy to see how this deeply influenced thinking about holy communion, moving people to integrate it with Christ’s alleged heavenly offering.

To effect this association it was assumed that the bread and wine in some way become Christ’s actual body and blood and are thus united with the heavenly offering. This process may have been assisted by a misunderstanding of the eucharistic language of some of the Fathers. The doctrines of the Mass, the Eucharist and a real presence of Christ’s body and blood took shape, and became deeply embedded in Western thinking.

Sadly, with the obscuring of the fundamental doctrine of the Work of Christ finished on the Cross, the assurance was lost of a full and free experience of

salvation through repentance and faith alone in the completed sacrifice of Calvary. The loss of that assurance led to the compensating doctrines of salvation involving self-effort, Purgatory and prayers for the dead.

■ The parting of the ways

The study of the original Greek New Testament was fundamental to the Reformation and also to that power of the Reformation, the recovery of the inner experience of salvation through repentance and faith alone in the death of Christ.

The doctrine of the Church of England was reformed to be firmly and exclusively based on the Bible, as is clearly and emphatically expressed throughout the *Book of Common Prayer* and the *Thirty-nine Articles of Religion*, to which every ordained Anglican minister has pledged subscription and loyalty.

Article VI declares that everything necessary to salvation is to be found in Scripture and nothing is to be required as an article of the faith unless it can be proved from holy Scripture. Article XIX places as a mark of the visible Church of Christ the preaching of the 'pure Word of God', thus excluding the adulteration of Scripture by mixing it with tradition. The Church of England *Prayer Book* of 1552 expressed the New Testament teaching on the communion, closely returning to the example and commands of the Lord and his apostles.

■ Tradition and the Gospel

The belief in a continuing heavenly ministry of atonement that is the basis of high doctrines of the Eucharist, popularly called 'Tradition', has no source or support apart from Jerome's aberrations. That belief obscured the message that Christ's atoning work was finished at Calvary and with it the gospel of justification by faith, which is 'the Rest' of Hebrews 3 and 4.

As Christ did not enter into the Rest of his finished work neither can we enter the Rest of justification by faith alone, for according to the Vulgate-based Tradition, the atonement of our sins is never completed.

Although the Tradition that Christ is continually offering for sins in heaven

has no warrant from Scripture, it has intoxicated influential Anglicans. Bicknell: ‘...the whole period of time from the ascension to the Return is one age-long Day of Atonement’ (*Theological Introduction to the Thirty-nine Articles* p 112 [probably the only work on the *Articles* many clergy have ever consulted]). ‘Christ’s redeeming work did not end on the Cross. It was consummated when as our high priest he entered into heaven to present his life to the Father,’ (p 113). ‘So our Lord, by his presence within the veil, is now making atonement for us,’ (p 144). ‘Our Lord is an abiding priest and an abiding sacrifice,’ (p 145).

More influential was Dix’s *Shape of the Liturgy*, which was the basis of the 1980 *Alternative Service Book* communion service, now in *Common Worship*. Dix quite openly rejected Scripture in favour of Tradition (p 3), and in doing so rejected the teaching and pattern set by Christ himself at the Last Supper. The claim in the *Alternative Service Book* Eucharistic Prayer that we ‘follow his example and obey his command’ is not true.

Dix, rejecting Scripture in favour of Tradition, dismantled the pattern of the Last Supper set by Christ and rearranged it to portray the Lord’s words of administration said after the distribution, to be words of consecration active before the distribution. On the other hand, it is to be noted that Hooker taught emphatically that as the Lord gave the disciples unconsecrated bread and wine, any eucharistic prayers can only affect the worshipper not the elements (Book V lxvii 6).

Following Dix, the *Alternative Service Book* communion conveys the impression that the bread and wine, in some way changed by the Holy Spirit through the Eucharistic Prayer, enshrine a Real Presence and become themselves the source of blessing.

Another Gospel?

In *The Shape of the Liturgy*, the work of Christ on Calvary’s Cross is relegated to be a mere preliminary to the provision of the eucharist: ‘...the atonement and reconciliation achieved by the sacrifice of Christ. It is important to observe that they are all here predicated not of the passion as an event in the past but of the present offering of the eucharist’. (Dix’s work cited p 48).

The Anglican doctrine that ‘The visible Church of Christ is a congregation in which the pure word of God is preached and the sacraments be duly administered according to Christ’s ordinance’, (Art XIX) has been set aside so that the word of God is adulterated by Jerome-based Tradition and the sacrament is reconstructed to implement that Tradition.

Instead of the holy communion confronting us with the crucifixion of the Son of God and the command to examine ourselves in its light (1 Cor 11:26, 28), the attention of Anglican worshippers is directed to a consecrated wafer as containing in itself God’s blessings.

Bicknell taught that the bread and wine are brought together to reconstitute Christ: ‘His body and blood’ primarily [*sic*] represent his perfect humanity. The living Christ bestows upon his members the strength of a perfect human life in the holy communion by a voluntary act we receive the life of Christ into our souls that it may become our life’ (work quoted p 489).

To teach that the bread and wine represent his ‘perfect humanity’ is far from the Scripture. The bread and wine were not brought together to reconstitute Christ’s ‘perfect humanity’, but given in emphatic separation, (‘Likewise after supper he took the cup) to proclaim his death on the Cross (1 Cor 11:26), where he was made sin (2 Cor 5:12) and a curse (Gal 3:13). It was on the Cross that atonement was made, not in heaven, for he ‘bore our sins in his own body on the tree’ (1 Peter 2:24).

The blessings said to be conveyed by eating the consecrated bread, such as forgiveness and receiving Christ’s life are ‘stolen’ from the Cross. Scripture offers these blessings on the basis of repentance and faith alone in the finished work of Calvary. Far from being driven by Holy Spirit conviction of sin through facing the Crucifixion, to look to the death of Christ as the source of forgiveness and life as Scripture directs, worshippers are taught that the ‘voluntary act’ of receiving a wafer conveys these benefits.

The idea that Christ’s life is imparted through receiving the sacrament without being integrated with repentance seems to border on the amoral. All that appears to be demanded is a ‘voluntary act’ of reception.

Far from giving ‘more earnest heed to the things which we have heard lest at

any time we should let them slip', because there is no 'escape if we neglect so great salvation,' and far from having a Godly 'fear lest a promise being left us of entering into his rest, any should come short of it,' the 'salvation which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord' really seems to be rejected in favour of speculation based on the aberrations of an overworked and reputedly bad tempered fourth century cleric.

All Anglican clergy have at each stage of their careers affirmed their loyalty to the *Book of Common Prayer* and the *Thirty Nine Articles of Religion*, which submit only to the authority of Scripture. But the 1980 *Alternative Service Book* although it states on page 10 that the doctrine of the Church of England is to be found in the *Thirty Nine Articles of Religion*, in its communion service flouts Articles VI, XI, XIX, XX, XXV, XXVIII and XXXV by rejecting Scripture in favour of Tradition.

■ As often as you eat this bread...

The only explanation of the communion in the Bible is that it preaches to us the Lord's death in the context of self-examination. The Lord's death is the subject of some 160 New Testament references that explain its significance and its benefits. The holy communion is the subject of but two references: one saying it preaches the Lord's death and the other that his death calls together a fellowship (1 Cor 10:16, 17; 11:26).

If the Tradition concerning the eucharist were truly of God, the balance of teaching matter would surely have been reversed and the New Testament would have been packed with information, promises and directions concerning the sacrament. Paul would not have said, 'I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ and him crucified', rather he would have said as many of today's clergy might say, 'I determined not to know anything among you save Jesus Christ and him present in the eucharist'.

■ Reconciling the irreconcilable

The rise of Anglo-Catholicism which began around 1840, popularized the belief that Catholic Tradition was at least equal to Scripture. Pressure grew to rewrite the communion service to incorporate Catholic Tradition and this was achieved in the 1980 *Alternative Service Book*, where all but one of the

committee subscribed to Catholic Tradition, (that one representative of conservative Anglicanism was also the youngest member!).

The problem Anglican Catholics face is the one which the Council of Trent found unsolvable: how to reconcile Scripture and the Vulgate. The Roman Catholics cut the knot by rejecting Scripture as a source of authority in favour of Vulgate-based Tradition. This problem for Anglican Catholics applies particularly to the Epistle to the Hebrews where the Vulgate's errors are the root of the Tradition of Eucharistic theology.

In spite of the fact that the death of Christ is referred to as a finished work some twenty-two times in the Epistle, (1:3, 13; 2:9, 10, 14; 3:11; 4: 1, 3, 9; 5:9; 7: 27; 8:12, 14, 25, 28; 10:2, 10, 12, 14, 18; 12:2), tortuous attempts are made to show that it was not.

The Pulpit Commentary on Hebrews 8:3-4: ('Wherefore it is of necessity that this one, [ie Christ] also have somewhat to offer.') 'These verses are in proof of the assertion of v2 *viz* that Christ has his ministry in the heavenly tabernacle. What Christ offers in the heavenly sphere is surely his own atoning sacrifice. He is regarded as carrying its efficacy with him to the mercy seat above, and so for ever offering it; even as it is continually pleaded in the Eucharist of the Church below.'

The word 'surely' betrays the speculative nature of the commentator's assertions for which he can produce not a single Scripture that actually says that Christ is now offering his sacrifice. The comment also demonstrates the link between the Eucharist and the alleged heavenly offering.

The SPCK *New Commentary* expresses the same idea when commenting on Hebrews 7:27, 'Who needeth not daily as those priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for his own sins and then for the sins of the people: for this he did once when he offered up himself'. In all conscience this verse is starkly clear that Christ offered himself 'once', qualified as under Pontius Pilate by the word 'when'. Yet the commentator sees: '(1) ...It is to the ministry of the ascended High Priest in the heavenly tabernacle that the offering refers, not to the death on the Cross itself, but as included in this priestly work... (2) 'Once for all' stands in opposition to 'daily', ie repeatedly. It is consistent with a perpetual offering in the heavenly shrine.' (Absent fathers on the books of the

Child Support Agency can explain to anyone interested the difference between a 'once for all' payment and a 'perpetual' payment!).

In the light of the Epistle's twenty-two references to the death of Christ as a finished work, and the absence of any Scripture anywhere mentioning Christ's continual offering, such exegesis is strained beyond any serious claim to acceptability.

Consider also Hebrews 10:11, 12 ...'And every high priest standeth daily ministering and offering often-times the same sacrifices. Which can never take away sins: but this man, after he *had offered* one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God.'

'Had offered' is again aorist, a past event, and its conclusion is marked emphatically by the words 'sat down', which is in vivid contrast to the pose of the priest commanded by God in Deuteronomy 18:5,7 when engaged in offering and described in verse 11, who 'standeth daily ministering and offering'.

Again, after his death and resurrection, Jesus showed from the Scriptures that 'repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name'. Compare this with Hebrews 10:17-18, 'And their sins will I remember no more. Now where remission of these is, there is *no more offering for sin*'.

Apart from the need to sustain Jerome's aberrations in the Vulgate and the vast edifice of eucharistic theology to which they gave rise, there are no grounds whatsoever for these tortured attempts to postulate a continual heavenly offering. Without Jerome, no one could possibly have discovered a continual offering in Hebrews or in the rest of the New Testament and the current eucharistic mountain would not have developed.

Appeal is made to two or three passages that refer to Christ's heavenly ministry without specifying what that ministry entails. From these it could be inferred that Christ is continually offering his sacrifice, but only if evidence to that effect is supplied from elsewhere. The commentators criticized do not do so for they have not supplied one such reference.

Support for the continual offering is sought in the 'intercession' of Christ in

Hebrews 7:25. But Jesus said, 'In that day you will ask in my name. I am not saying that I will ask the Father on your behalf. No, the Father himself loves you because you have loved me' (John 16:26, 27).

The meaning of the word translated 'intercession' is primarily 'to meet with'. Here the idea 'introduce' is required. The context of the intercession in Hebrews 7:25 narrowly defines its application: 'Therefore he is able to save completely *those who come to God through him.*' This is exactly exercised when in harmony with John 16:26 we approach the Father and ask 'in Jesus name'.

■ The rest of the New Testament

The rest of the New Testament negates attempts to establish the doctrine of a continual offering. In the Gospels, referring to his death, the Lord himself said, 'The Son of Man came...to give his life a ransom for many' (Mark 10: 45). A ransom is one payment which when made sets the captive free.

The Lord's teaching about 'His Work' in John's Gospel is illuminating – 'My meat is to do the will of him who sent me and to *finish* his work' (John 4: 34).

John 5:36: 'For the works which the Father hath given me to *finish*...'

John 17:4: 'I have *finished* the work which thou gavest me to do.'

On the Cross the Lord cried out 'It is *finished*'. The Greek word there translated 'finished' is in the perfect tense (an act completed in the past but the *effects* of which are regarded as continuing into the present). The cognate word is used seven times in Hebrews with reference to Christ.

Then in the Epistles: Romans 6:10, '...he died to sin once for all.'

1 Corinthians 15:3, (the New Testament definition of the Gospel) '...the Gospel...that Christ died (aorist) for our sins according to the Scriptures'. Supreme among those Scriptures is Isaiah 53, taken by the Lord as applying to himself (Luke 22:37) and quoted in the Acts and Epistles to explain the Lord's death.

In Isaiah 53 the Lord's death is seen as a finished work viewed from the triumph of the resurrection – 'Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we did esteem him stricken of God smitten by him and afflicted. But *he was* pierced for our transgressions, he *was crushed* for our iniquities; the punishment that brought our peace *was* upon him, and by his wounds we are healed' (vv 4-5); 'for the transgression of my people *was* he stricken' (v 8); 'After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and *be satisfied*' (v 10); 'Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because *he poured* out his life unto death, and *was numbered* with the transgressors. For *he bore* the sin of many' (v 12). This chapter, every verse of which except verse two, is quoted in the New Testament and 'is foundational to the New Testament's understanding of Jesus' (Stott), would have to be completely rewritten to accommodate a continual offering of Christ's sacrifice.

Ephesians 5:2: 'Christ loved us and gave (aorist) himself up for us as *a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.*'

1 Peter 2:24: 'Who his own self bore our sins in his own body *on the tree.*' (Not in heaven!)

1 Peter 3:18: 'For Christ also hath *once* suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God.'

Although the idea that Christ is continually making an offering of himself in heaven is widely held by Anglican clergy, it really should appear inadmissible to them, for all have pledged their loyal subscription, not only to the *Articles*, half a dozen of which are flouted by the *Alternative Service Book* but to the *Book of Common Prayer*, where the 'Prayer of Consecration' says concerning the Cross, '...who made *there* (by his one oblation of himself *once offered*) a full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world'.

A return to the Old Covenant!

The alleged continuous heavenly offering denies the Rest into which Christ entered when 'after he had offered one sacrifice for sins sat down,' for he is said to be continually offering his sacrifice.

The alleged continuous heavenly offering also denies us the Rest that Christ's finished Work has obtained for us: 'For we which have believed have entered into his rest', and 'There remaineth therefore a rest for the people of God'.

Paul's exposition of this Rest, is the experience of justification of which Romans speaks, 'Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God'; 'There is now therefore, no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus' and the experience that God's 'Spirit himself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God'.

These doctrines are so undermined that few who are under the Tradition-based eucharistic teaching have any assurance of the certainty of sins forgiven, peace with God and of everlasting life.

The argument of Hebrews 10:1-2 from the continuing sacrifices of the Old Covenant, applies equally to the continuing offering of Christ: 'For this reason it can never by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. If it could, *would they not have stopped being offered?* For the worshippers would have been cleansed once and for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins.' The whole point of the New Covenant is that Christ's sacrifice was so complete it stopped being offered and our 'sins are remembered no more'.

Because they are taught that the sacrifice of Christ has not stopped being offered, worshippers under Catholic Tradition do not feel cleansed 'once and for all' any more than Old Testament worshippers. I have directly questioned Anglican lay people about their certainty of going to heaven. They have all replied, 'I am doing my best, what more can I do?'

I have been told that it is 'presumptuous to say one is saved'. Presumptuous to discover one is so vile, so totally and rightly condemned, that in desperation one casts oneself in repentance and faith on the finished work of Christ's sacrifice for our sins and discovers that his promises are true?

It seems more presumptuous to have a hope of eventually deserving, earning or achieving God's favour by good works and frequent communions which seem to be the proffered alternative.

Under eucharistic Tradition worshippers can only feel assurance of forgiveness as far as their last communion. They must seek to establish some righteousness of their own and to deserve acceptance by God. Skilled Catholic theologians may be able to evade these charges, but they are truly felt by lay people who are under Catholic Tradition.

Along with the Roman Catholics, they are driven by the doctrine of the continual offering of Christ to believe that 'Justification consists not in the mere [*sic*] remission of sins, but in the sanctification and renewal of the inner man by the voluntary reception of God's grace and gifts.' (Council of Trent, Session vi, chap vii). In plain English: we are accepted by God because of a combination of forgiveness and our own merits.

That was the position of the worshipper under the continual offerings of the Old Testament.

Under the New Covenant prophesied by Jeremiah and expounded in Hebrews, God affirmed '...their sins will I remember no more', (Heb 8:12). But it is essential to the ministry of the continual offering of Christ, that sins are continually being remembered, for otherwise there is no point in a continual offering.

It is of the essence of the New Covenant where sins are remembered no more, that Christ's work should be a finished work, that having 'provided (aorist) purification of sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven', (Heb 1:3).

The relevance to the decline of Anglicanism

There are two factors here that appear to be of the utmost importance in the current crisis. The first concerns our ministry to people; the second concerns our relationship with God.

The first is typified by the sad fact that confirmation is ruefully called 'the Passing Out Parade' where candidates receive their 'Leaving certificate'. Bishops have voiced the encouragement they feel at confirmation services. A study to see if those confirmed are still in the Church one or two years later would, from my observations, prove sobering. Hard won new members, as

the statistics are making so painfully clear, do not stay in the Church.

Candidates are told wonderful things about the eucharist, but when they at last receive the wafer nothing happens! Many are disillusioned thinking either that they are not good enough for it to 'take', or else there is 'nothing in it'. In the post-modern culture, people do not accept 'facts' simply because a priest or politician tells them to!

If what is taught about the eucharist were true, Churches based on Catholic Tradition would be packed and lives transformed by the wafers. Those who teach otherwise would be silenced by actual results.

Under the preaching of the death of Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit, things happen. When Paul said he 'determined not to know anything among you save Jesus Christ and him crucified', (perfect tense), he immediately said that this subject preached was in demonstration of the Spirit and power', (1 Cor 2:2-4). When the death of Christ is proclaimed in the power of the Spirit, there should be a 'demonstration'. This was apparent throughout the Acts of the Apostles and has been down through the ages.

When at a quarter to nine in the evening of 24 May 1738, a certain man who had not only been baptized and confirmed, but who also was ordained and had received the holy communion hundreds of times without any benefit to his soul, at last exercised faith alone in the death of Christ, he recorded, 'I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, in Christ alone for salvation, and an assurance was given me that he had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death'. (his italics). John Wesley was somewhat different from that day on, and his proclamation of that gospel did not exactly result in a period of church decline!

The second factor concerns God himself. All clergy at every stage in their career affirm before God and the Church, their loyalty to the Scriptures, the Creeds, the *Book of Common Prayer* and the *Thirty Nine Articles of Religion*.

It is patently obvious and widely acknowledged that for a very large proportion who subscribe to Catholic Tradition, that affirmation is false. John Henry Newman, the champion of attempts to reconcile the *Articles* with

Tradition, was compelled to acknowledge failure and leave the Anglican Church for Rome.

The command 'Thou shalt not bear false witness' seems clearly to be violated on a massive scale together with the injunction to 'provide things honest in the sight of all'. If God is seeking worshippers who will worship him in spirit and in *truth*, and if the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of *truth*, there seem to be ample grounds for believing that the decline of Anglicanism involves the grieving of the Holy Spirit.

I cannot see how such a policy of institutional dishonesty can confidently expect the blessing of God. Apposite seems to be the warning that when his people break his commands he 'will make them few in number'. (Lev 26:22; Deut 4:27).

Have we drifted into a Deism feeling that God isn't involved in the Church and we can believe and teach anything we like? The warnings of Hebrews are consolidated by the fiercely defensive attitude of the Lord and his apostles to doctrine, contrasting the 'pick and mix' approach of much current theology.

There are some who omit the imprecatory passages of the Psalms because they are a bit strong, but what about: 'You hypocrites teaching for doctrines the commandments of men!' 'Woe unto you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Woe unto you blind guides. Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the judgment of hell?' Were they Christ-like words to use just because someone's theology was a bit different?

Should we not give some weight to the warnings given by the Lord and others in the New Testament, that those who teach will receive a severer judgment (Luke 12:48; 17:1; Gal 1:8-9; Heb 13:17; James 3:10)?

Where does the buck stop?

When a large business concern finds its market catastrophically shrinking, shareholders hold those at the top accountable, sack the chairman and purge the board. Responsibility for the doctrine of the Church of England is the particular province of those at the top, the Bishops.

They used to be charged at their Consecration: ‘Are you ready, with all faithful diligence to banish and drive away all erroneous and strange doctrine contrary to God’s Word; and both privately and openly to call upon and encourage others to the same?’ That charge has been considerably watered down in the *Alternative Service Book* Consecration of Bishops, omitting completely any responsibility for doctrine but instead majoring on promoting ‘unity, peace and love.’

The Book of Common Prayer prayed ‘...that all they that do confess thy holy Name may agree in the truth of thy holy Word’ as the necessary condition by which we ‘live in unity, and godly love’. Currently, unity is sought at almost any price and any condition. One bishop is reported as exclaiming in exasperation, ‘In the Church of England today, you can believe what you like as long as you use the same book!’

As clergy make their pledge of subscription and loyalty to the Scriptures and the *Articles*, there might be in some of them, confusion, ignorance or careless thinking. But the Saviour said: ‘Take heed how ye hear; for whosoever hath, to him shall be given; and whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken even that which he seemeth to have.’ It is difficult to escape the sad conclusion that there are those who profess before God and the Church loyalty to doctrines they in fact do not hold, and also that our Bishops ordain and induct clergy knowing that the professions are not sincere?

But we cannot hide behind our Bishops. The Epistle to the Hebrews is concerned that each individual member of the Church should accept responsibility for the basis of their faith: Hebrews 3:12 ‘Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief’; (4:1) ‘Let us therefore fear, lest a promise being left us of entering into his rest, any of you should seem to come short of it’; (4:11) ‘Let us labour to enter that rest lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief’; (12:15) ‘Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God’.

For the sake of our eternal safety, our usefulness in the Church and our effectiveness in witness, we must imitate those in Berea, who ‘with readiness of mind searched the Scriptures daily, whether those things were so’ (Acts 17:11).

The bringing in of a better hope

An immense amount of hard work, prayer, discipline and loving ministry is being exercised right across the theological spectrum of the Church of England. But it is not bearing fruit. However, 'he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help' (Heb 6:10).

'No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however it produces a harvest of righteousness' (Heb 12:11).

There are, of course, solid grounds for believing that God is involved with his Church and if that is so, the present crisis is an exercise of his providence to compel our reflection. 'My son, do not lose heart when the Lord rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves' (Heb 12:5-6).

The Biblical history of Israel is a recurring pattern of blessing followed by decline until God's people woke up, examined the situation and cried to God for help in repentance and faith. That pattern can be traced in Church history, for on many occasions an experience of failure and decline brought Christians to examine themselves and to enter afresh an experience of the 'message of the Cross' as 'the power of God unto salvation'.

DENNIS PETERSON *is a retired clergyman living in Westcliff-on-Sea.*