

Editorial

The Doctrine Commission of the Church of England has just released its latest book, *The Mystery of Salvation*, to a blaze of publicity in the media, which were trying to give the impression that the Church no longer believed in Hell. To the authors of the Report, this must have come as a depressing reminder that the world is full of people who just do not understand – after all, the Report was, if anything, a reaffirmation of the reality of Hell, even if Dante or Milton might not have recognised it straightaway.

In truth, it does seem as if the media got it wrong, in more ways than one. Connoisseurs of the Doctrine Commission's Reports would not be at all surprised to discover that the latest one was long on mystery and short on salvation, but here they would receive a pleasant surprise. For this Report has a good deal of theology packed into it, and it does not back away from the difficult questions. It even takes the Bible and the Church's theological heritage seriously! In the context of the present-day Church of England this is really quite remarkable, and many readers will doubtless conclude that it is the strong showing of Evangelicals on the Commission which enabled this approach to be adopted.

Of the eighteen members of the Commission listed at the beginning of the book, no fewer than seven may be regarded as card-carrying Evangelicals, and many of the others would be broadly sympathetic to an orthodox way of thinking. The Commission even goes so far as to suggest, without actually saying so in so many words, that the classical Anglican formularies teach what is known as the penal substitutionary theory of the Atonement, complete with propitiation and the lot! This is a vast change from only a few years ago, and we must be grateful for it. Yet at the same time it raises questions for the Evangelical wing of the Church, which we are having to face at many different levels. As Evangelicals work their way into the structures of the Establishment, so they are forced to compromise. A position like the one adopted by Church Society or *Reform* would not sit comfortably with the wide range of beliefs currently held (and accepted) in the Church.

The fundamental reason for this is that conservatives of every stripe start from different premises than the ones generally adopted by the more flexible, or 'open' Evangelicals. They tend to have a structured, systematic theology, which cannot bend easily to accommodate this or that opinion. 'Open' Evangelicals, on the other hand, tend to think that everybody has some aspect of the truth, and that most of our differences can be ascribed

Churchman

to context, personality, tradition, vocabulary and the like. No doubt there is some truth in this, and we must be aware of our own inadequacies in this respect. Alternative theological viewpoints do exist, and not all of them can be called 'liberal' or 'unbiblical'. Evangelicals can, and many do, learn a great deal from people whose basic approach to the issues of the day may be radically different from their own.

At the same time, Evangelicals cannot be happy with a kind of comprehensiveness which says that all views are equal, and all may be held in good conscience within the Church. We are people who accept the Church's classical doctrines, not for the sake of tradition, but because they appear to us to be most faithful to Scripture. This does not mean that they can never be developed further, but experience has shown that the utmost caution must be employed here. Breakthroughs in theology do not occur very often, and it is hard to believe that our own non-doctrinal age is on the brink of some exciting new discovery in this area. This suspicion is confirmed by the Commission itself, which examines the ASB and finds it wanting, at least by the standards of Anglican orthodoxy. So why does anyone continue to use it? It is a hard thing to say, but it seems clear that lack of theological seriousness must be the principal explanation, and one does not have to go far to find this suspicion sadly confirmed.

Given this situation, Evangelicals have a duty to keep their faith pure, and to preach it without compromise. Either we believe that Christ took our place on the Cross and shed his blood as the ransom for our sins, or we do not. Either we believe that every person is called to accept (or reject) this truth, or we do not. Everything else is ultimately obfuscation. Is there another way to say this? No doubt, but do we gain anything by it? Why go looking for fancy labels and new ways of expressing old truths if this is not necessary? What indeed is the great mystery about salvation?

Evangelical theologians have a special duty here to make things simple and accessible to people, not to confuse them with clever arguments and fancy vocabulary. It is true that *mystery* is a word with a distinguished theological pedigree, but it is also true that most people today think that it means something incomprehensible. And while salvation is undoubtedly incomprehensible in the sense that we shall never understand why God chose to show his love to sinners like us, it is not at all difficult to grasp at the practical level.

Put it like this: I am bad, God is good. Because God made me, I ought to be good, but am not. I am responsible for this problem, even if I did not create it myself. However, the problem is too big for me to solve. Only God can do this. He sent his Son to die because he loved us so much that he wanted us to live for ever with him. We could not make ourselves good

by our own efforts. So the Son of God took our badness, paid the penalty for it, and set us free from an obligation which could only crush us. Now we live in his love, and he works out his purposes in our lives, even though we are still bad and do not deserve it. One day, this badness will be taken away, and we shall live with God in complete fullness and freedom. When that happens, the world will be judged. Those whom God loves will go to be with him; everyone else will be separated from him and sent to eternal punishment in Hell.

Is this simplistic? Perhaps, in places. No doubt there is a great deal more which can be said about it. But this is the basic framework in which salvation must be understood, accepted and proclaimed to others. As Evangelicals, we cannot afford to get wrapped up in fancy talk just for the sake of ecclesiastical diplomacy. We have a message to proclaim to dying men and women. It is not our cleverness that will change the world, but the Holy Spirit, working in us through our preaching and teaching. If that is foolishness to the Greeks of today, so much the worse for them. Our duty is not to pander to them, but to proclaim the eternal Gospel. Let us get on with it, and not let ourselves be distracted by well-meaning but futile attempts to wrap it all up in strange and mysterious dress.

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