

All One Body We: A Personal Opinion of Establishment, Voluntarism, Connectionalism and Independency

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The Church of England, at the end of the second Millennium, with those members of the Anglican Communion where the Liberal agenda has taken hold, is in serious trouble. The Lambeth Conference of 1998 demonstrated a very serious division between the churches of the West and the Third World where the Great Commission is still taken seriously and where the church continues to grow. The Liberal, or better the Anti-supernatural agenda that denies revelation, not only denies the great doctrines of the Faith but also the ethical standards arising from that revelation. The result is that the general standards of the Western secular world are paraded as being the standards by which the church should live.

This has led to a very serious fall in the numbers of those professing to be Christians on the basis that if there is no difference in substance between the church and the world why should one bother to belong to the church. Life membership of the world is guaranteed without any subscription. In the Church of England worshipping numbers have dropped below the million mark for the first time and there are similar declines in the United States and Canada. This fact creates a major problem for those who remain faithful but who see little hope of any meaningful change in the leadership of the Western Church.

The response has been to create bodies that remain within the overall framework of the English Church but whose allegiance is being stretched to its limit. On the evangelical side there is Reform and on the Anglo-Catholic, Forward in Faith. Numbers of Anglo-Catholics have left for Rome since the promulgation of the Priest's (Ordination of Women) Measure. It would seem that far fewer Evangelicals have gone until it is remembered that many had already left for the free churches following the call by Dr Martyn Lloyd Jones in the 1960s.

It is not surprising with this background of doctrinal and ethical conflict that the question of church polity should begin to be taken seriously. The nature of the establishment in England is also being seriously debated. It is unlikely that there will be any serious change while the present Queen remains on the throne. However, should Prince Charles succeed that is another question altogether. It is noteworthy that the present Labour Government has removed the hereditary peers from the House of Lords and is now planning to repeal the Act of Settlement of 1701 which debar Roman Catholics from the throne.¹

The long-standing constitutional position of the United Kingdom is likely to undergo severe stress and strain and the Church of England, because of its established position, must perforce be caught in the middle of this conflict. It is therefore little wonder that Rome appears to offer a traditional stability and sacramental continuity. For the Evangelical, Independency with freedom of conscience to preach and to evangelize, free from intrusion and interference by authorities which demand money but see no responsibility for maintaining doctrinal and ethical standards, also looks attractive. It is not the intention of this article to examine the position of Rome, nor to advise the Anglo-Catholics what they should do. The object is to look at Connectionalism and Independency from an historical perspective and then to examine what is the real basis of the establishment position.

1 Background

It seems that one of the main reasons for the differing views of the Church and therefore in the relationship of brother Christians to one another there lies in the differing concepts of how the church at large relates to the world. Two societies have existed on earth since the beginning of the human race, Church and State. Both were in embryonic form in the creation of man and woman. One man and one woman were the foundation of all the families upon earth and it is from the families on earth that Church and State have their beginnings by the command of God. As far as the church is concerned we are dealing with the visible church, remembering that underlying the visible church is the spiritual and invisible election of God (Article 17). This article is followed by the declaration in Article 18 that salvation may only be obtained by the Name of Christ. The visible church is then defined:

The visible church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in which the pure Word of God is preached and the sacraments be duly administered according to Christ's ordinance...²

It is clear from the manner in which these articles have been framed and positioned that the intention is to maintain the truth that grace is prior to faith which, 'comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God' (Rom 10:4). The article goes on to point out that certain churches such as Rome and Alexandria have erred not only in matters of doctrine but in practice also. There is a complexity of the true and the false that means not only that there are false brethren in true churches but true brethren in false churches. This creates a difficulty for all those who would be faithful to the 'Word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ' in relationships.

While the primary task of the church in the world is spiritual and has eternal consequences, the state raised up by God (Romans 13) for the maintenance of law and order, is restricted to this world and to temporal functions. There is therefore a vast dissimilarity between the two in their prime function. In simple terms, the state is a body of people united under one government that legislates and enforces those laws. It acts as judge in criminal trials and civil cases. It defends its borders. The state is territorial while the church is supranational although it may have national elements occasioned by culture and language. The church is worldwide but has local and regional expressions. Whatever those local and regional expressions might be there is a unity in Christ which transcends the local and temporal.

These two societies have a common origin in the plan of God but for differing purposes. They are essentially independent of one another but by virtue of the fact that both exist in this world, often side by side, with a degree of common membership there is a mutual relationship that needs to be very carefully defined. This can best be seen historically.

2 Historical Survey

The New Testament leaves us with the church in a dynamic missionary situation. The command to evangelize and to teach men all things that Christ has commanded is being taken seriously and from details in the Acts of the Apostles it can be seen that there is latent in the situation a tension between the church of Jesus Christ and the Roman Empire. In Ephesus, through the preaching of the Word by Paul, social and economic consequences have arisen.³ The silversmiths who make the statues of Diana of the Ephesians face a loss of their livelihood because many of the people of Ephesus have turned 'from idols to serve the living and true God'. This indicates at the very least that there is a pressure from the Church upon

the society that it is working within. That pressure is essential if the church is to fulfil its task in the lives of Christians of being salt and light in a corrupt and dark world.

This might well be described as the voluntary period that lasted some 300 years and to which the state had no answer save persecution. Not that the persecutions were widespread or continuous. In the providential care of God, Roman Generals were so often busy fighting one another that they had little time to turn their attention to the church which continued to spread in the known world and even beyond the borders of Roman influence. This is often regarded as the great period of the church and in one sense it was, although by the time of Constantine, serious doctrinal difficulties were becoming apparent.⁴ Nevertheless, the possibility of martyrdom and the political and economic disadvantages suffered by Christians both tended to act as an external discipline to keep the church generally pure and separated from the worst elements of society.

The church moved very quickly from the position of being a voluntary body to quite another relationship with the state. We must remember that the idea of a state being neutral in religious matters is of very late origin. Each state had its own gods and as a member of that state loyalty to the gods was held to be loyalty to the state and disloyalty was regarded as treason. Rome tolerated all religions subject to loyalty to and worship of Caesar. The only exception made by Rome was that of the Jews. While the Christian church was identified as part of the synagogues this toleration existed for Christians, but once the separation of Christianity and Judaism was recognized sporadic persecution followed.

A series of events occurred in AD 312 that radically changed the position of the church. It was the conversion of Constantine. There is no time to enter into the details or to assess its precise religious significance. It is sufficient to say that Constantine on his way to battle was convinced that he saw a sign in the heavens of a cross that had the inscription, 'in this sign conquer'. Constantine believed this to be a sign from God, proceeded to battle and won a signal victory. Instead of being a persecuted religion, Christians now found themselves tolerated and respectable. This was not wrong in itself but when it was followed by a lack of discipline in the admission of members, serious problems were created.

The period of ten years from AD 303 to 313 had seen the whole weight of the Empire brought in persecuting power upon the church but the church emerged unscathed from the 'fiery trial' only to be weakened by state patronage. Now events were occurring that would create a struggle for power in the church between the East and the West. Rome at the time of Constantine was the acknowledged metropolis of the Empire but Constantine transferred his capital to Constantinople. This created two centres of political authority followed by two centres of authority in the church. Rome, deserted by the political power built up an unscriptural claim to the primacy of the Christian Church based upon the myth of Peter's papacy. Slowly at first but then more definitely Rome achieved supremacy. From Gelasius' claim that emperor and pope are alike supreme each in his own sphere, Gregory VII (1073) claimed as Peter's successor the 'right of judging and unbinding in heavenly and spiritual matters, how much greater is his right over earthly and worldly things'.⁵

Now the church weakened by state control and diverted by Gregory and his successors found itself in competition with the rulers of this world. In this struggle, all weapons were used save the 'spiritual weapons of warfare.' In AD 1054 a division occurred between the East and the West followed by the persecuted church becoming the persecutor. The people of God who in

the early centuries had laid down their lives for a testimony to the Saviour were now called to lay down their lives as a testimony against a persecuting church.

The church entered the Middle Ages strong in political power but weak in faith. Whenever the church seeks political power the glory of Christ departs. Church and state were united in such a way that the papacy ruled and taxed Western Europe. Reformation of the church could not be accomplished without the reformation of the state whether it was a nation such as England or a city-state such as Geneva. Henry VIII was directly involved in the breach with Rome. Luther relied upon the protection of the German princes.

The answer to the Reformation of the Western Church was excommunication and victimization by the civil authorities. Lollards, Hussites and Waldensians were among the various movements, which arose in reaction to the worldliness of the church. Wycliffe in England died peaceably in his bed at Lutterworth, only to have his body exhumed and burnt. Hus was condemned and burnt at the stake for his views.

The Protestant churches themselves were not above using force to bring people into subjection. Cranmer and Latimer authorized the burning of at least one Anabaptist. Calvin was involved with the execution of Servetus and Zwingli drowned a number of Anabaptists in Lake Zurich. While these facts are true, it is also a fact that Protestantism had no Inquisition and the executions, although entirely wrong and indefensible, were relatively small in number. Men were learning but as yet they had not fully learnt that conscience cannot be bound.

3 The Puritan Experiment

In England with the deliberate restoration of Protestantism by Elizabeth I, although set in the context of the reforms of her brother Edward VI, the Queen sought as broad an accommodation as was possible at the time to unite the nation behind her. She had inherited Protestants from the remnant of the Lollards; from the followers of William Tyndale; from the Lutheran Churches in Germany; as well as the Reformed from Geneva. Nearly all had their own agenda and France and Spain were watching to detect the slightest weakness. That would have been a signal for war and invasion. Initially, recusant Catholics were largely left alone. It was the Papacy's action in calling for the assassination of the Queen that led to persecution.

The Elizabethan Settlement created a broad-based church to unite as many of the subjects as possible on the grounds of political expediency. In hindsight, it may seem wrong but it was doubtful if any other policy would have worked. Nevertheless, it is true that Elizabeth grew more restrictive and traditional, as she grew older. That is not to deny that the *Book of Common Prayer*, the 39 Articles, and the ordinal were in the main reformed on the Genevan pattern even though a number of Articles came directly from Lutheran Confessions.

In England many of the Puritans, a movement inside the Church of England between the dates of 1560 to 1640, desired further reformation. The Queen blocked this and the Separatist movement began. Robert Browne 1553-1633, a Cambridge man, became the leader of a Separatist Church. In 1582 the church moved to Holland to escape persecution but Browne himself was excommunicated after a quarrel between himself and other members of the church in 1583. He returned to England and was accepted by Archbishop Whitgift as sufficiently orthodox to be inducted into a living in Northamptonshire in 1591. He ministered there until 1633 when he died after a quarrel with the local constable.

Historically, it was the seventeenth century which saw the beginnings of modern Independency, particularly the revolutionary decade of 1640. On the one hand, Independency described a political position that sought toleration for those inside or alongside the established church. In many respects Independency was concerned with liberty of conscience and the right of private judgment. Private judgment was a plank of the Reformation but notwithstanding this it was still deemed to be right for authority to bind the conscience of subjects. L J Van Til says of William Perkins:

That conscience was at liberty in relation to other men and institutions was set forth in detail by the Elizabethan Puritan theologian (*conforming*) William Perkins. With his declaration that Christ in the New Testament, has given a liberty to conscience, he set out to indicate what this declaration meant for his contemporaries... If conscience was sovereign, if conscience was at liberty, the jurisdiction that pertained to institutions such as the State (*and necessarily the Church*) was limited, distinct and separate from other institutions.⁶

Perkins was too advanced for the sixteenth century and contrasted radically with the English Government's view of toleration in Elizabeth's latter years. The seventeenth century began to deal with this issue and tracing it would take us to the history of America. Independency now meant those who believed in or practised a congregational form of church government. Either inside the parish system or separated outside, the main concept was that of the gathered congregation in covenant with one another.

In my present parish, the Puritan Minister was driven out by Archbishop Laud for 'inconformity'.⁷ This consisted of refusal to wear the surplice and failure to make the sign of the cross in baptism. It would be naïve to believe that such items as the sign of the cross and the surplice were the real warp and woof of the independents' programme. There is underlying his migration the liberty of the conscience to worship God in Spirit and in truth without let or hindrance by Archbishop Laud and the duty to control one's own affairs not least in doctrinal and moral problems. It is the commencement of the democratic process by which spiritual penalties are applied to spiritual offences. Henry Barrow, a lawyer who was converted to Christ from a dissolute life and who became ultra-orthodox, wrote:

This power of excommunication, election, ordination, etc, is not committed into the hands of one particular person...; nor yet into the hands of the eldership only, or of the pastors of many particular congregations (as the reforming preachers would have it) so much as it is given to the whole church, even to every particular congregation and to every member thereof alike.⁸

Barrow was eventually hung!

It is the area of discipline that lies at the heart of this process and in particular, the process of excommunication. Hill writes:

The early Brownists⁹ advocated separation from all churches where excommunication was not an effective sentence. The early Independents also thought of excommunication as a spiritual sanction. The records of the early Baptists deal with little except excommunication... The members of the congregation decide for themselves what is sinful and what is not.

Although the end of the Commonwealth came from a number of causes, the split between the Presbyterians and Independents most certainly hastened the return of Charles II and the

restoration of the Church of England. From the restoration there flowed the ejection of some 2000 ministers in the church. As Ryle points out:

To no times are Englishmen so indebted for their civil and religious liberty as the times in which Richard Baxter lived. To no body of men do they owe such an unpaid debt of gratitude as they do to that noble host of which Baxter was a standard bearer: I mean the Puritans.¹⁰

The Puritans for all their intense biblical spirituality saw a definite relationship between the church and the state.

4 Tensions Between Church and State

The fact is that, however modern governments try to be, there are a limited number of options. The state trying to be very modern actually begins to regress to paganism. If church and state are separated, then private and public moralities also begin to be separated. Perhaps the reason why Prince Charles wishes to change the Coronation Oath and to be the ‘defender of faiths’ rather than the ‘Defender of the Faith’ is not that he is peculiarly concerned with every sect but that the Coronation Oath ties him down to specific biblical responsibilities. He therefore wishes to change the job description and to sit loose to a position that conflicts with his private life. The church must necessarily be in conflict with conduct that is prejudicial to biblical Christianity. John the Baptist’s denunciation of Herod for having his brother’s wife is a clear principle that the church must follow in matters of morality. It may co-operate in what is just and holy and good. It may not tolerate evil.

5 The Task of the Church

It is instructive to note how the New Testament, while aware of human suffering and injustice, does not make the alleviation of these the primary message. The ministry of Christ affords an example of the teaching that prioritizes the recognition of the claims of a Holy God and reconciliation to him. The task of the church is therefore to proclaim Jesus Christ and him crucified and to expound the Word of God so that people may come to put their trust in him and be reconciled to God and built up in the faith.

It is in this area that we need to be clear that the task set the church must embrace two major elements that were identified at the Reformation. The first is an authoritative Word of revelation from God. We must be fully persuaded that God is there and that he has spoken through apostles, prophets and finally through his only begotten Son. The second element is as critical as the first and that concerns the way of salvation. The doctrine of justification by faith remains as Luther described it, *articulis stantis vel cadentis ecclesiae* (the article of a standing or falling church). James Atkinson says aptly:

(Jesus) declined all other ways of bringing people into the kingdom save by the one way of preaching grace and forgiveness and kindling faith in the heart of his hearers. Likewise it can be shown that the mission and message he committed to His apostles, was of the same character as His own. They remained faithful. Had the apostles and early Christians set about the reformation of the desperate social evils of their day... Christianity would have run into the sand and now be remembered in similar terms to those we use to refer to the revolt of Spartacus.¹¹

The Reformers were very well aware of this tension between the proclamation of the one true gospel and political service, between the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world, between the justification of God in Christ and the justice of human laws. Luther in his inimitable boldness spoke of the two kingdoms, the ‘kingdoms of this world’ being the left

hand and the 'kingdom of God' the right hand. All the English Reformers took great pains to make it clear that the two kingdoms exist side by side, each being competent in its own sphere. They spoke to their day. We have to speak to ours!

There can be conflict between the two kingdoms and this is brought out vividly by all four evangelists. It is the conflict between the Suffering Servant, Christ, God's representative new man, the incarnate Son of God and the human representative of the greatest world power at that time. Pilate's duty, which he well knew, was not only to pronounce Jesus righteous but also to release him. He turned freely from that duty because of political expediency. In so doing, Pilate fulfilled the will of God foretold by the prophets that Jesus who knew no sin was to be made sin for us. The declared spotless Lamb of God was taken to the slaughter by the order of the chief representative of the state.

Yet there is a further aspect to this when one considers the reaction of Paul to the persecution of the Jews when he appealed to Caesar, the highest tribunal in the Roman Empire. There is something of a Barthian 'dialectic'. The state is both appointed by God and yet so often acts as the enemy of God. Cranmer worked with Henry VIII, supported Edward VI and was given over for execution by Mary Tudor. Those in power are responsible but they do God's will, often unwittingly, even unwillingly, but certainly unerringly. God is not the author of sin, nor does he tempt any man. God works all things after the counsel of his own will. If we accept this thesis then it follows that the state is sometimes but not always and nor even necessarily hostile to the Christian Church. What then is the pastoral role of the church?

6 The Functions of a National Church

The Nottingham Statement of 1977 affirmed the following principles that would find a very warm acceptance by the great majority of conservative Evangelicals now:

We hope that our Church will not seek to renounce but to share with other Protestant Churches the ancient constitutional ties which establish her as the church of this realm. We value these not for privilege but for service, not for the church but the nation. We look beyond the secularism of the present day to a day when the English shall again seek the substance as well as the name of Christian faith.

There is here a willingness to co-operate with other churches of a like faith even if not of a similar order. In times of spiritual blessing the desire is for spiritual unity among the churches affected. The relation with the state is a blessing to be shared not a privilege to be jealously guarded.

Likewise the apostle Paul far from denying the legality of the state and its right to try him appeals to Caesar against the plots of the Jews to kill him. In so doing he affirms his own teaching in the Roman epistle that the 'powers that be are ordained of God'. His teaching in 1 Corinthians 6, 1-7 is no denial of the authority of the state but a command that Christian brethren should not take one another before pagan courts on minor charges.

The temptation is to cut the Gordian knot and separate the two in a way that Scripture does not envisage. The problem of Independency is that it has a tendency to become exclusive and isolated, often lacking in outreach to the local community and having very little ability to influence affairs in the nation.¹² It can also fight long and hard over secondary issues. Shepherding is not unknown, leading to serious bullying of the congregation (collectively and individually) or of the pastor by the elders. To sum up this section, there is a very complex

biblical relationship between church and state. The problem is that there is no higher human court of appeal. It is for these reasons that, while Independents should be respected, there is a serious weakness in the system.

7 The Purpose of the Church of England

What is the underlying philosophy of this connectional church? Bishop Knox of Manchester in his work 'The Tractarian Movement' writes that: 'for the Protestant the term church has two meanings'. Knox uses the terms Holy Catholic Church and the 'Church to which he belongs'. He is actually speaking of the Church Triumphant that consists of the ransomed people of God of all time and the visible expression of that church in a particular time and place. The question that he is asking is what is the relation of the one to the other? His answer is to set out the position of the Elizabethan Settlement of 1558:

Elizabeth's answer... amounts to this. In England the Sovereign assisted by Parliament has approved the work of Cranmer and the convocations in their attempt to give expression, as truly as human wisdom can, to the doctrine and discipline of the Ideal Church in accordance with the Word of God. The nation has made this expression of the Church its own, calling the result the Church of England. There is nothing in the Church so constituted which interferes with the Church Ideal, no sort of interference with the relation between Christ and His people (that is with the Holy Catholic Church). This Elizabethan claim was contested by the Roman Catholics and the Puritan (separating and non conforming) but the Church of England survived these dissensions. On the one hand the Church of England did not claim to be the sole exponent of the Church Ideal. Other countries were entitled to express that ideal for themselves as well as they could.¹³

The idea was that every English citizen should accept this church. That expectation was unrealistic and eventually dissent was tolerated. But for all, those who dissented and those who conformed, the Church of England remained the national church in which all citizens retained the right of attendance at worship that was scripturally orientated in its regular readings and liturgical expression. This was seen in the occasional conformity in the parish church especially where the ministry was evangelical. Grimshaw of Haworth and Whitefield are two eighteenth century examples of genuine ecumenism.

It is interesting that the Church of England retained episcopacy on the basis of its personal pastoral oversight and in continuity with the early church. It did not insist on episcopacy for others before the Restoration of 1662 and continental churches of both the Reformed or Lutheran schools were welcome to minister without re-ordination. Knox is writing in the 1930s and it is clear that since that time there has been a concerted effort through Church Assembly and General Synod to make drastic alterations in the basic principles of the Church.

Yet for all that the Church of England still maintains a biblical witness in many areas and retains the opportunity to go to every man's door. It has the responsibility to serve the state as constituted by God and has through the past centuries taken a particularly Protestant Christian approach. It also has the duty to oppose the state where the state moves from a Christian position. The Church has signally failed to do so in many areas of Parliamentary legislation which have been passed by different governments over the last 30 years. Much of the supine witness of the Church arises either from a wrong understanding of its duties or a failure of nerve.

The place of the Crown is the key to the understanding of the Church of England and how closely entwined it is in the national life. The Crown, Parliament and the Church of England intersect at this point. The Crown as the Supreme Governor through the Coronation Oath effectively enters into covenant with God and the people to maintain the Protestant religion. This is the religion that is to be taken to every man's door. The removal of Rome had left a vacuum that needed to be filled urgently. Henry filled that vacuum with his own person and in effect became the English Pope. It was Catholicism without the Pope but leavened by evangelical leaders who sought to maintain a biblical witness at the risk of their lives. The Elizabethan Settlement recognized the new arrangements redefining large areas of English life. Although other churches were illegal at first it was clear that not all would fit into this broad-based settlement. Slowly toleration for others developed.

Conclusion

The doctrine of the church is one of the most discussed and debated doctrines in which some of the greatest minds operating in the church have laboured and have come to very different conclusions. There is the question of the separation of the Eastern Orthodox from Western Catholicism. There is the Protestant separation from Rome and there is the problem of Lutheranism and the Reformed Churches. There is the difference between episcopacy and presbyterianism; between presbyterianism and independency. There is the question of establishment by law or not.

It was the seventeenth century that saw the proliferation of various denominations separated mainly by church polity. Presbyterians, Independents, Congregationalists, Episcopalians all began to flourish. The idea of a Catholic Church visible in the world was the dream of the early Middle Ages. It was never realized and gave way to the more biblical view of many churches of varying doctrine and polity. As Roman Catholicism had been overtaken by events, so too was the magisterial reformation of Luther, Calvin, and Cranmer.

Various denominations have come into being, whether connectional or independent, for the reason of the liberty of conscience. For the future, much depends on the political circumstances that the churches find themselves in. The Church of Jesus Christ may well have to adapt but it will survive whether by law established or voluntary, connectional or independent.

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Endnotes:

- 1) Report *Daily Telegraph* Saturday November 20th 1999
- 2) *39 Articles of the Church of England*
- 3) Acts 19: 23-41
- 4) Both John Calvin and John Henry Newman regarded the first three centuries as the golden age of the church, although for different reasons.
- 5) Temple *Citizen and Churchman* p 15

- 6) Van Til *Liberty of Conscience* (Phillipsburg NJ: P&R 1992)
- 7) The Rev Peter Bulkley left Odell in 1634, with his family and members of the congregation. He founded Concord in Massachusetts and the first parish church there.
- 8) H A Barrow *Brief Discoverie of the False Church* (1590) cited by Christopher Hill *Society and Puritanism* (London: Panther 1969) p 366
- 9) (After Robert Brown who became a Baptist after leaving the Church of England.) Towards the end of his life he returned to the C of E. Hill p 366
- 10) J C Ryle *Light from Old Times* (London: Chas Thynne 1903)
- 11) J Atkinson 'Church and State under God' *Latimer Studies* 15 Oxford p11
- 12) One of the reasons why the British Evangelical Council was founded was to create a body that could represent the views of Evangelicals and particularly Independents as the media will normally only take notice of representative bodies. This is particularly true in relation to the Church of England and its associated bodies.
- 13) E A Knox *The Tractarian Movement* (London: Putnam 1933) pp 381/2