

Churchman

EDITORIAL

Witnesses to the Word?

To celebrate the fact that it has reached clergy retirement age, Oak Hill College has recently produced a history of its first sixty-eight years (1932-2000), a racy little number called *Witness to the Word* (Paternoster Press, 2002). Guided by one of its former principals, who evidently sees himself as a kind of Elisha-figure (see p. 161) and a former vice-principal, the innocent reader is given an encyclopedic introduction to everything he or she ever wanted to know about the place—and a good deal more besides. Like most books of its kind, it manages to be a factual account—we are mesmerized by bishop's reports, course proposals and commemorative speeches—without really telling the truth. Insiders can read between the lines, of course, but others are liable to switch off, and thereby miss the very real contribution which this pseudo-history makes to our understanding of contemporary Evangelicalism in the Church of England.

Although it is now largely forgotten, Oak Hill was founded at a moment of supreme crisis for old-style Evangelicals. They had just managed to forestall the adoption of the 1298 Prayer Book, which they regarded as the first step down the slippery path to Rome, but the fact that they were forced to rely on Parliament (and on votes from Scotland and Northern Ireland) demonstrated just how weak they had become in the counsels of the Church. In an atmosphere of impending catastrophe, Charles Baring Young, who until then had been a philanthropic social reformer in the late Victorian tradition, decided to make his London home and a good part of his fortune available for training non-university men for the Church's ministry. The Anglo-Catholics had long been doing that, with considerable success, and it was widely believed at the time that Evangelicals would reap similar dividends from such an investment.

From the start, the college was under suspicion from the authorities and had uneasy relations with those Evangelicals who had accommodated themselves to the spirit of their age and thought that Baring Young and his associates were

nothing but reactionaries. As colleges go, there can be no doubt that Oak Hill was an eccentric place, which in many ways was more like a family farm than any academic institution. But despite these quirks, and against the odds, the college prospered, and was soon turning out men whose ministries have not only been of great credit to the college but also of considerable benefit to the church. Whatever they may have thought of the place itself, bishops knew that they could rely on Oak Hill men to provide a faithful and consistent ministry in circumstances which would defeat the more refined products of other theological colleges, and they learned to value them accordingly. The post-war revival of Evangelicalism in the parishes owed more to this kind of loyal drudgery than is generally admitted, particularly when it was combined (as it usually was) with an overwhelming desire to preach the Gospel without fear or favour.

Then came the 1960s, and the Evangelical world, like the rest of the Church (and indeed the nation and even the world) fell apart. Historians tell us that this was a delayed reaction to change, that the calm of the 1950s was an illusion, and that most of what happened was long overdue. But however true that may be, the decade of the 'swinging sixties' has entered the popular imagination in a way that no other period has done. It caught places like Oak Hill unawares, and exposed just how out of step they were. Change was inevitable, but like all such revolutions, it was difficult not to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Prayer Book revision was an obvious case in point. By the 1960s, everyone recognised its inevitability, but few could have realised how quickly even 1928 would come to look hopelessly outdated and conservative. Before long, entirely new liturgies were being promoted, in which faithfulness to one strand of patristic tradition (rather than loyalty to the teachings of the Reformation) played the dominant role. Evangelicals caved in, not least because these new liturgies used 'you' instead of 'thou', and before long, anyone who worried about doctrine was regarded as tiresome, eccentric, or both.

What few people understood at the time was that the Church of England, and the parties within it, were products of the 1662 Prayer Book culture to a much greater extent than anyone was prepared to admit. Remove the BCP from everyday use, and you removed the spiritual framework on which the Church had been built. Not all of this was bad, of course. Oddities like north-end

celebration (which had developed out of a misapplication of the rubrics) could be dispensed with without shaking the foundations too much, and it must be admitted that phrases like ‘the quick and the dead’ undoubtedly do sound different in the age of the motorcar. But these were trivialities compared with the great issues of sin and salvation, where the cutting edge of Cranmer’s theology was abandoned in favour of a lightweight appeal to congregational solidarity. ‘Peace’ was no longer associated with the receiving of Christ’s saving body and blood into our broken lives, but with handshakes and hugs all round. From the atoning sacrifice of the cross we moved on to the happy fellowship of the redeemed—a shift of emphasis rather than an abandonment of tradition no doubt, but an important shift nonetheless.

The Church of England as we now see it is the product of a generation deprived of sound doctrine and at the same time saturated with feeling(s) of one kind or another. The modern heretic is not the one who denies some ancient truth, but the one who breaks fellowship with others who do. Tolerance, breadth, inclusiveness—these are the order of the day, and Oak Hill (along with the evangelical world generally) has not been able to escape from this. Charismatics and feminists, who would have been shown the door as late as 1960, have not only been welcomed - at times they have virtually been allowed to take over. To be fair, this has seldom if ever been deliberate policy; it has happened because the ability and determination to resist it have been lacking. Those who have spoken out in favour of the old ways have been dismissed as reactionary—and even worse, as ‘unloving’ and intolerant. The only thing which the new breed of so-called ‘Evangelicals’ has carried with them from the past has been an aversion of homosexuality - but for how long? It is an unloving and intolerant way of thinking, after all, and so unlikely to survive in the longer term. The Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement probably just has to bide its time as it watches one evangelical bastion after another gradually cave into its demands. As our new Archbishop has shown, one can do this without abandoning the historic creeds of the Church, so why not?

What has gone wrong? The authors of the Oak Hill history have called their book *Witness to the Word*, but it is precisely this aspect of the matter which must be called into question. The Word became flesh, and it was among us that we beheld His glory, full of grace and truth. The preaching of the Gospel has never been a matter of words only, which is what doctrinal formulations

ultimately are. It has always been much deeper than that—changed lives must accompany the preached Word, which is only truly authenticated in that way. Generally speaking, Evangelicals have forgotten this and are suffering as a result. The book tells the story beautifully—to get ahead, one must please the authorities (bishops, academic inspectors and so on), and to please the authorities one must bend as far as possible in their direction. Even if the bending is more formal than sincere, like that of Naaman in the house of Rimmon, it is still what is perceived—and woe betide anyone who refuses to go along on grounds of (dare we say it?) a principle like faithful witness to the Word! Of course, the idolaters of Damascus see the posturing for what it is, but rather than be enraged by such apparent hypocrisy, they just laugh up their sleeves—with Evangelicals like that, why worry?

It is a sorry tale, and if we learn anything from it, it must surely be that complacency is the last thing we can afford. But even as we struggle against what now seems to be the inevitable, we must remember that God's people have always lived by grace, not by works, and that it is precisely in our weakness that His strength is most likely to be revealed in all its glory. The trend-setters of the Evangelical world may be heading down the road to Damascus, determined to do their bit in front of the Rimmons of our time, but the New Testament reminds us that strange things can happen on that road when God decides to intervene. Let us hope and pray that He will do so in time, and that when Oak Hill comes to celebrate its centenary, the whole Evangelical wing of the Church of England may once again truly be, and be seen to be, true witnesses to the Word made flesh.

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