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175 YEARS

By David Phillips

We have let it go by without really mentioning but the year just passed marked the 175th anniversary of the founding of the first of Church Society's forebears, the Protestant Association. This article, to be continued in the next issue is based on a recent talk looking at the history, work and issues facing Church Society.

Church Association

We begin not at the beginning, but with Church Association founded in 1865. It was established to uphold the protestant and reformed faith of the Church of England, and to oppose the introduction of ritualistic practices and the doctrines that lay behind them. Those practices included such things as stone altars, medieval mass vestments, adoration of the bread and wine at communion and so on. The Association saw itself as firmly part of the evangelical party of the Church of England and prominent within it were J C Ryle and the 7th Earl of Shaftesbury.

The rise of ritualism and liberalism saw evangelicals feeling under pressure and they responded in different ways. Some left but remained Anglican in outlook. The Free Church of England was established for this reason, as was Lightbowne Evangelical Church in Manchester for which Church Society are still the Trustees. Others became non-conformists. The issues today may be different but people are responding in similar ways in England with a number of ex-Anglicans now 'on the edge'. The situation in North America is even more pronounced and we have members or associates of the Society both within and without the formal structures on both sides of the Atlantic.

Part of the work of Church Society, as with the Association, is to persuade people that they can stay with integrity, to help provide gospel opportunities for clergy and to protect evangelical ministry from opposition. Patronage is a clear example of this. It was Charles Simeon, an earlier evangelical, who is credited with the founding of the evangelical patronage trusts of which Church Society Trust is just one.

Church Association Trust

Church Association began to acquire patronage rights and in 1903 established a separate company, now called Church Society Trust, to hold those rights. We currently have 113 parishes. Although patrons are far less influential than they once were, the Trust tries to take every opportunity to exert and influence and to maintain contact with parishes, not just when there is a vacancy. We have been conscious however in recent years that some, particularly younger clergy, are more interested in planting new churches, possibly peripheral to the Church of England, than in taking on existing work. It is particularly difficult to find men willing to serve in rural parishes, though there are some encouraging signs.

The Free Church of England provides a sobering reminder that the grass is not always greener on the other side. It was once flourishing and at its peak had nearly 100 churches. Today it has very few and the more conservative evangelicals have left, or been driven out, because the denomination wandered from its reformed roots. Moreover, there have been persistent claims over the years of the influence of freemasonry. At the Reform Conference in October one of the remaining Bishops was urging those disaffected with the Church of England to see it as an option, but anyone considering this would be wise to speak to others who have taken the path before them.

For all the failings of the Church of England the fact that it is an established Church has encouraged

evangelicals to remain within it. We have not suffered the same level of fragmentation that we see in other reformed churches such as the Church of Scotland and the Presbyterian and Episcopal churches in the US. This is a good reason to stay and why Church Society is still committed to defending the Church of England as a reformed, national Church.

Action against ritualists

In the 1880s the Church Association began to take legal action against ritualists. The practices they introduced had mostly been unlawful for 300 years but the Bishops did not seem to want to exercise discipline. The consequences of that collapse of discipline are still with us today and are part of the reason for the rapid rise of liberalism. Evangelicals, in particular Church Association, therefore took action themselves through the ecclesiastical courts and other means, and generally they won the cases. But the ritualists refused to accept the ruling of the courts, indeed some refused to recognise the legitimacy of the court, and were found to be in contempt. As a result some were sent to prison.

There are important issues here about how to respond to error and these have surfaced again in the debates over the Anglican Covenant. If discipline is a mark of a true Church, then lack of discipline makes that church defective. In North America the revisionists want no discipline over doctrine but hypocritically are fighting tooth and nail over obedience to their canons and ownership of properties.

Church Society today tends to the same view as the Association, that if necessary we will take legal action as we did in response to the ordination of women legislation. But in the late 1800s many felt the Association had gone too far.

Protestant Churchmen's Alliance

The Protestant Churchmen's Alliance was formed in 1891 with the opening address being given by Lord Grimthorpe who claimed the backing of J C Ryle. He supported the goals of the Association, but not its tactics. This dynamic continues; people can be united against error but disagree strongly about how to oppose it. When Church Society opposed the appointment of Rowan Williams as Archbishop we were criticised by friends as well as enemies. For myself I am convinced that we were right and I believe the present problems in the Anglican Communion would not have gone as far under a different Archbishop.

My experience of evangelicals in the Church of England is that whilst we often agree on what is wrong we can rarely agree on what to do about it. Those who try to provide a lead invariably find that it is like trying to herd cats. Whatever someone suggests, someone else, on principle, will want to do the opposite.

In the end I think this is not just our weakness, but our strength. Evangelicalism is not about institutions or powerful leaders. If we put our confidence in those things they will ensnare us as the Church of Rome demonstrates. Evangelicalism is about accepting the trustworthiness and authority of God's Word written and everything that flows from that, including our acceptance and proclaiming of the glorious gospel of Christ. That heart continues, despite our institutions and leaders.

One of the formal objects of Church Society is to work for the reunion of Christendom under the sole authority of God's Word written, a vain hope perhaps, but a noble aspiration.

Protestant Association

The Protestant Churchmen's Alliance absorbed two already existing bodies, one of which was the Protestant Association. This had been founded in 1835 to oppose the growing influence of Roman

Catholicism in our national life. One of its early champions was Hugh McNeil of Liverpool.

The name Protestant has fallen out of favour with many today but in Church Society we continue to use it and to oppose Roman Catholicism. The great threat facing us today seems to be secularism, and there is therefore pressure to join with Roman Catholics against a common enemy. Some indeed are attracted to Rome because they see it as the last bastion and because the protestant churches have become so weak and divided. But Rome deceives people, it sets up a false authority and teaches people to put their faith in vain idols – ourselves, Mary or the power of the Church – rather than the Saviour Jesus Christ.

The League

The Ladies League was formed in 1899 and the first chairwoman was Lady Cornelia Wimborne (a Spencer Churchill). As our other forbears demonstrate the English aristocracy contained a strong Protestant and Evangelical contingent which seems to have largely disappeared.

By 1906 the Ladies League had become the National Church League and absorbed the work of the Protestant Churchmen's Alliance (via another body). The League was firmly committed to the Bible, Prayer Book and Articles, but did not wish to be identified as of a particular party. It was concerned with *true Scriptural religion in Home life and in Society*.

The first chairman was Henry Wace after whom our offices are named. Wace was a fine scholar and like Ryle, McNeil and others, able and willing to take senior posts in the Church, in his case Dean of Canterbury. The apparent discrimination against classical evangelicals today in such posts is an issue we have highlighted in various quarters but with little success to date.

We will continue this overview in the next issue with the League's response to The Prayer Book crisis.

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