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A LOOK ACROSS THE POND

A Brief Analysis of the Status of North American Evangelical Anglicanism

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It has often been said that the people of the United States and the United Kingdom (really the British Isles) are a common people, separated by a common language. This aphorism is especially true when one starts discussing ecclesiastical matters. One must always define one's terms in order to be clear.

Take for instance the word evangelical. It is a good word, a very biblically derived and descriptive word. It is however, a loaded word, and carries with it all sorts of historical definitions and qualifications. One has to know his audience and how it defines terms if he intends to effectively communicate.

In the C of E and the C of I traditional evangelical Anglicanism (at least historically speaking) is clearly defined. The Scriptures are the final authority in all matters. The Three Creeds and the XXXIX Articles define the biblically derived summations of precise Christian doctrine. The BCP, ordered after the received theology of the Creeds and Articles, defines matters liturgical. Ceremony and clergy attire is traditionally evangelical, Morning Prayer and monthly communion...no bells or incense...no sacrificial vestments. The XXXIX Articles are more than minimally assented to, they are believed wholeheartedly. In earlier times English and Irish evangelicals would have read Cranmer, Ridley, Latimer, Ussher, and Ryle, and would unreservedly agree with Dean Litton's assessment that (quoted by Dean Paul Zahl, in his work 'The Protestant Face of Anglicanism'), "The Anglican Church, if she is to be judged by the statements of the Articles, must be ranked amongst the Protestant Churches of Europe."

Evangelical, Low-Church Anglicanism in North America, whether in Canada or the United States, is in the main, very different than that found in the Church of England or Church of Ireland. In preparation for these articles, I interviewed clergy and laity in varying capacities in both countries. Some were serving in the ECUSA and the ACC, others in Anglican jurisdictions not in official communion with the See of Canterbury. Interestingly, many asked not to be directly quoted. Those that did not mind being quoted for the record were very clear in their understanding. All were in agreement that traditional Evangelical, Low-Church Anglicanism of the English and Irish variety is presently at a low ebb.

Dean Peter Moore, President of Trinity Episcopal School for Ministry in Ambridge, Pennsylvania has served in both the Anglican Church of Canada and the Episcopal Church USA. TESM is the ECUSA's only official seminary that describes itself as evangelical. When asked for his take on evangelical Anglicanism in North America Dean Moore responded;

"Radically low church Anglicanism has almost disappeared in North America, save for pockets in Canada such as the redoubtable Little Trinity Church in Toronto which was founded by Irish Protestant Anglican immigrants in the mid Nineteenth Century."

Dean Moore continued; "One still finds quaint Episcopal Churches in places like Virginia that affect a low church image, occasionally with central pulpits (usually dating back to Colonial days) and discretely de-emphasized Holy Tables. But this is frequently combined with a vague liberal

theology rather than being a thought-out position derived from clear biblical principles. There are, of course, many Anglican and Episcopal churches in North America that are charismatic in feel -- if not also in theology. These frequently have informal services that have a low church appearance; but celebrants may be in chasubles or albs, and choirs may be robed with processions, while candles on the altar illuminate the sacramental action. Very occasionally one finds a celebrant who elects to wear a sports shirt and open collar at one of these informal services -- even when it is the main service on Sunday. But this practice, now common in the UK, is very rare in North America."

He seems to go straight to the heart of the North American evangelical Anglican position when he stated; "The fact is that churchmanship issues do not feature strongly in the North American Anglican picture. The real dividing lines are theological rather than ceremonial, and go to the heart of the deeper issues: biblical authority, classical Christian ethics, and whether or not one has a real Gospel to preach." This writer would add that in his experience that the average self described evangelical Anglican in the United States is at best only vaguely familiar with the historical and theological backdrop of the churchmanship issues that Dean Moore references.

His description of the churchmanship practices at the lone official evangelical ECUSA seminary would not provide that much comfort to many traditional evangelicals within the C of E or C of L...who remain acutely aware of the historical and theological churchmanship controversies of days gone by; "Churchmanship at Trinity Episcopal School for Ministry, for example, would be considered relatively broad by low church English standards. There are Gospel processions (not every week), the normal wear is cassock and surplice or a cassock alb with stole, many cross themselves at key points in the service, ashes are dispensed on Ash Wednesday, and so forth. Variations are normal, and occasionally there will be a service with incense and the celebrant in a chasuble. Bells are not used. As students come from a wide variety of churchmanship traditions, the seminary tries to demonstrate that Gospel-centeredness can coexist with a wide variety of traditions."

Canon John Newton is the rector of St. Paul's parish, a large evangelical congregation in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and his description of evangelical worship in Canada is reminiscent of the eclectic approach to churchmanship and worship set forth by Dean Moore. In commenting about the various evangelical parishes throughout Canada he writes; "In most cases (including our own at St Paul's) these churches have adopted contemporary (or, in Robert Webber's terms, "blended") worship patterns. I personally have serious qualms about the Christology, soteriology and eucharistic theology of the liturgies in the Canadian Book of Alternative Services (1985) and I know that many evangelicals share this. We would be much more comfortable with the Kenyan, Australian or English alternatives. St John's, Shaughnessy, is the only parish I can think of that still holds exclusively to the BCP for its morning worship--and it is the largest Anglican congregation in Canada (although not large by US standards.)"

The Rev'd Doctor Peter Toon, Vicar of Christ Church, Biddulph Moor, Lichfield Diocese, served in North America for a number of years and is a keen observer of all things Anglican on the North American continent. His position is that evangelicalism has gone soft doctrinally and that due to the adoption of the 1979 ECUSA Prayerbook.

In a recent editorial in **Mandate**, the official bi-monthly publication of the American Prayer Book Society, Toon commented on ECUSA's version of evangelicalism's embrace of the 1979 Prayerbook. "...Rite II services in "contemporary language" provide the necessary ingredients of intelligibility, simplicity, accessibility, relevance and meaningfulness and so are a means of making their services and outreach popular and attractive. So they pay little attention to the actual doctrinal content -- i.e., they do not check it against the doctrinal content of the classic BCP & the Articles of Religion in terms of who is God, who is Jesus and what is salvation."

Toon's comments were in agreement with those made by Dean Paul F.M. Zahl, Dean of the Cathedral Church of the Advent (ECUSA) in Birmingham, Alabama, in his 1998 book, **The Protestant Face of Anglicanism**, "What we are left with now is amnesia regarding what once was; a negative judgment placed on any service but the so-called Rite II Holy Eucharist; and a false smile of "celebration," like the Cheshire Cat's, which covers over the mystery and tragedy of human pain. With the approval and lightning ascent of the 1979 Prayer Book came the end, for all practical purposes, of Protestant churchmanship in what is now known aggressively as ECUSA." Up until the 1979 Prayer Book, the word Protestant preceded Episcopal. A minor row was started a few years ago when an ECUSA bishop concerned about the direction of the church, decided to incorporate the name Protestant Episcopal Church, USA, which had never been duly incorporated. In the next installment, I will endeavor to explain the practices of evangelicals who are not in official communion with the See of Canterbury.

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