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A CHALLENGE WITHOUT A HOPE

By James Crabtree

In June the Archbishop of Canterbury issued a reflection on the issues currently dividing the Anglican Communion entitled 'The Challenge and Hope of being an Anglican Today'. His paper is based on two key assumptions.

First, he assumes that true Anglicanism involves a necessary blend of "strict evangelical Protestantism", "Roman Catholicism" and "religious liberalism" such that for this blend to be altered at the expense of any one of these elements would undermine true Anglicanism.

Secondly, he assumes that "unity", involving the acceptance of all three elements, precedes truth and, indeed, is a prerequisite to finding truth.

The obvious consequence of his first assumption is that Anglicanism dominated by "strict evangelical Protestantism" is not true Anglicanism.

The consequence of his second assumption is that a Biblical definition of "unity" is precluded. "Unity" exists, according to The Archbishop, to enable truth to be discovered ("only the whole Church knows the whole Truth", as he puts it). As a result, "strict evangelical Protestant" claims to truth on the strength of Scripture alone are invalid, in his view. This is because such claims are not a product of that "unity" which he views as prerequisite to finding truth. Since "certain tensions or even sacrifices" are needed to preserve William's version of "unity" (as he states towards the end of the paper) it must follow that what Evangelicals understand to be Scriptural truths are open to compromise (or sacrifice) for the sake of so-called unity and also to enable "truth" to be discovered through the so-called unity of the three elements forming Anglicanism (Evangelical Protestantism, Roman Catholicism and liberalism).

All of this is, needless to say, in direct conflict with everything Church Society stands. It is Scripture alone that reveals truth and in turn determines the boundaries of unity within the church. **This we assert to be true Anglicanism and to be clearly upheld by the doctrinal formularies of the Church of England.** Truth precedes and determines unity. Unity does not precede truth or determine what is to be regarded as truth according to extra-Biblical (indeed anti-Biblical) reference points such as Rome and liberalism.

Almost all of what the Archbishop says throughout the paper reflects his erroneous assumptions. "Consensus" by itself is not a guiding principle, such that change must follow a "very much wider and deeper consensus" (as he puts it). Consensus not based on Scripture leads to disaster. Remaining together is not essential to find "the fullest possible truth", as he asserts. There is a sense in which unity is given to the church, but it is not the sense expounded by the Archbishop.

In describing the Anglican Communion the Archbishop poses a choice between "joining together" and "just celebrating our local identities and our personal preferences", but this is a false choice. Putting Scripture first is to be preferred because Scripture defines what is true. It is not to be relegated to the level of "local identity" or "personal preference".

In the second part of his reflections the Archbishop speaks of the "realities of Christian experience". By this stage in his argument these "realities" have been given his own particular colouring. This is seductive language but it is based on falsehood and leads to disaster. Unless the truths of Scripture alone guide our "Christian experience" the "realities" we will then confront will bring compromise and lasting harm and will fall under God's judgment. If truth can only be found through the "unity"

of incompatible elements within Anglicanism, as the Archbishop seems to assert, then the fruits of such "truth" will be a so-called "Christian experience" to repent of. His phraseology is seductive but the conclusions are flawed because the assumptions are erroneous.

Towards the end of his paper (see below) the Archbishop makes assertions about Anglicanism which are unsustainable because the things he seeks to balance are inherently incompatible. For example, the "sole, unmediated authority of the Bible" will challenge and confront the "culture around"; Scripture should never be subservient to culture in order to give "spiritual depth to the general shape..." of culture. Evangelical Protestantism does not "need" either Roman Catholicism or religious liberalism, contrary to what the Archbishop assumes. His Conclusion (see below) is equally unsustainable. "Concessions and unclarities" will not lead to sharing responsibility and sound decisions. They will lead to irresponsible compromise and unsound decisions.

In short, "Challenge and Hope" must be rejected because it does not adopt a Biblical approach and expressly surrenders the teaching of Scripture to other influences in order to preserve the Archbishop' own brand of Anglicanism.

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Extract from "Challenge and Hope".

The different components in our heritage can, up to a point, flourish in isolation from each other. But any one of them pursued on its own would lead in a direction ultimately outside historic Anglicanism. The reformed concern may lead towards a looser form of ministerial order and a stronger emphasis on the sole, unmediated authority of the Bible. The catholic concern may lead to a high doctrine of visible and structural unification of the ordained ministry around a focal point. The cultural and intellectual concern may lead to a style of Christian life aimed at giving spiritual depth to the general shape of the culture around and de-emphasising revelation and history. Pursued far enough in isolation, each of these would lead to a different place - to strict evangelical Protestantism, to Roman Catholicism, to religious liberalism. To accept that each of these has a place in the church's life and that they need each other means that the enthusiasts for each aspect have to be prepared to live with certain tensions or even sacrifices - with a tradition of being positive about a responsible critical approach to Scripture, with the anomalies of a historic ministry not universally recognised in the Catholic world, with limits on the degree of adjustment to the culture and its habits that is thought possible or acceptable.

The only reason for being an Anglican is that this balance seems to you to be healthy for the Church Catholic overall, and that it helps people grow in discernment and holiness. Being an Anglican in the way I have sketched involves certain concessions and unclarities but provides at least for ways of sharing responsibility and making decisions that will hold and that will be mutually intelligible.