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### **175 YEARS – PART 2**

By David Phillips

In the last issue we looked at the history of Church Society, how this shapes our current work and how some of the issues of the past compare to those which we face today. We pick up again with the National Church League.

#### **The Prayer Book Crisis**

The League was instrumental in the rejection by Parliament of the 1927 Prayer Book which had sought to add into the 1662 Book significant accommodations to Roman Catholic doctrine on key matters such as the nature of the Lord's Supper, and the means of salvation.

William Joynson-Hicks, Home Secretary and Treasurer of the League was a key player and subsequently became the first Viscount Brentford. We are pleased that the Fourth Viscount, Crispin, is still our President.

As with the earlier battles of Church Association it is possible to argue that although the battle over the Prayer Book was won, the war was lost. Almost all the errors of the 1927 book are to be found in modern Anglican liturgies and many evangelicals now use them apparently unaware or unconcerned by what they are therefore affirming. Church Society has continued to stand against these things not least in the Common Worship revision but it is very much an uphill fight.

#### **Publishing**

The League also founded the Church Book Room Press. At its peak it was both a publisher and a bookshop in central London. Publishing is still a key part of what we do in Church Society. Our aim is both to positively set out the great truths of the faith, but also to engage with contemporary issues, and encourage the reformation of the Church. The Society continues to stand for the same convictions. We affirm the authority and trustworthiness of the Bible as God's Word written and the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. These are what mark historic evangelicalism. In addition we stand for Reformed theology which the Church of England endorses in its official formularies – the Prayer Book, Articles and Ordinal. We value highly the Church of England as a reformed national Church and believe that is worth defending.

One of the main parts of our present publishing work is the theological journal *Churchman* which was begun in 1879 (there had been a journal of the same name half a century earlier but apparently unconnected). In the early 20th century *Churchman* ran into monetary and theological difficulties and the National Church League bought the journal in order to save it from both.

A theological difficulty with *Churchman* also arose in the 1980s which Andrew Atherstone has documented in a booklet published by Latimer House. The journal had published an article which appeared to undermine evangelical convictions. The Council of Church Society wanted action but the Editorial Board resisted leading to the entire board being dismissed and a new board re-appointed with just a few continuing members.

Both these incidents demonstrate that theological drift is a constant danger just as much today as in the churches to which the Apostle Paul wrote. Without wishing to tar them all with the same brush I know that one or two of those dismissed from the *Churchman* Board became quite hostile to evangelicals in later years.

It would be interesting to know what those who founded the Protestant Association and Church Association would make of Church Society today. Would they consider us liberal compromisers? I hope not and I believe it is important and noteworthy that despite obvious dangers Church Society continues to stand for the same important truths.

The editors of Churchman have included Henry Wace, W H Griffith-Thomas, Philip Edgecumbe Hughes and since 1984 Professor Gerald Bray.

### **Church Society**

In the early 20th century both the Church Association and the National Church League seem to have been flourishing but the tide would eventually begin to turn. Since the Second World War protestant evangelicalism in the Church of England has not been as healthy. The two organisations considered merger and this was accomplished in 1950. The National Church League became Church Society. Church Association was absorbed into the Society and Church Association Trust was renamed as Church Society Trust.

I have only listed in these two articles the main bodies which feature in our family tree, but the version on my wall (and on the website) had a total of 14 organisations (eight of which had 'Protestant' in the title). Our history contains different organisations which have come into being for different purposes, sometimes with different emphases, and certainly different tactics. I particularly like the fact that although the Protestant Churchman's Alliance was founded in 1891 by those who objected to the tactics of Church Association they eventually merged a mere 59 years later.

### **Working with others**

How to relate to other organisations is a continuing issue for Church Society and evangelicals more generally.

The Fellowship of Word and Spirit has a similar theological basis and considerable crossover of membership. I have been a member for many years and serve on its council. Yet it seems to have come into being at a time when it was felt that Church Society was taking a particular direction that some did not like and that was a definite factor in it being established. FWS has a good annual conference but other initiatives have largely depended upon the energies of one or two people and have been a bit stop-start.

Likewise, though Church Society had played a key role in getting people elected to General Synod in 1990 (there is still a "1990 Group" on Synod) the legislation to ordain women as priests was passed. Some felt that there had been insufficient support from larger churches. In the aftermath, when a group of leaders from larger churches met to decide how to respond there was a feeling that Church Society could not meet the needs of the hour. Partly as a response to this, but also concern about a wider range of issues such as quota capping, Reform was established. Some considered this to be a mistake, and yet Reform galvanised support, particularly from larger churches and younger clergy, in a way that Church Society had been unable to do.

There are differences between Reform and Church Society and I am also a member of the Reform council. Reform has a number of local groups and some of these are doing a fine work. Whereas initially it was slightly stand-offish to General Synod several Council members now serve there. More particularly it has tended to be made up of leaders of larger churches who, almost by definition, are doers. This means that things tend to get done if someone is sufficiently stirred up to do it. But the Reform leadership is self-appointing and on occasion this creates a tension with the membership and initiatives proposed by the leadership have not been warmly embraced. Some of the newer organisations such as Anglican Mainstream and the Fellowship of Confessing Anglicans

not only provide leadership in the same way but appear much more secretive about how decisions are made.

Church Society by contrast is very democratic. Our members are shareholders of the company and they elect the Council. The Council appoint the staff. If the Council don't like what I do they can sack me. If members don't like what the Council are doing, they elect a new Council – it has occasionally happened. Ideally half our Council should be lay people. All this leads to accountability and is in my view very healthy. The downside is that democracy is not always the most efficient way to do business – benign dictatorship is better but in a fallen world it never remains benign. It is also the case that an elected leadership does not always contain those who are best at leading.

The downside of democracy is politics. Church Society has suffered from bouts of intrigue over the years and perhaps one day someone will write a full history. But I think the structure of Church Society is a fundamental part of what it stands for. We are committed to the national Church which, for all its failings still retains a significant measure of democracy. This is not true of the Roman Catholic Church, nor indeed it appears of the Episcopal Church in the US. The establishment of the Church of England means that in theory the Church is accountable to the elected representatives of the people – that is to parliament. The advent of General Synod was intended to make up for the deficiencies of this arrangement as parliament lost interest in the Church, but the General Synod does not work well in this respect. Nevertheless it does still retain the principle of democracy and accountability which are a key part of the history of the Church of England. Church Society and its forebears have championed that history and accountability over against the dictatorship that prevails in the Church of Rome. We have been prepared to use democracy to achieve our ends and it seems only right that we should follow the same principles in our own organisation.

The Society has a long history and a definite theological and ecclesiological base. Sadly this clear protestant reformed Anglicanism is not widely found in the Church of England today nor is there as much enthusiasm for a national Church as there once was. Nevertheless, we continue to believe that these things are right and are worth contending for.

*David Phillips is General Secretary of Church Society*