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**‘THE ECLIPSE OF THE GOSPEL’  
CHURCH SOCIETY CONFERENCE 2011 REPORT**

By David Meager

Church Society met Friday 1st – Sunday 3rd July at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford for its annual conference. The aim of the Conference was to examine, past and present, the impact of Anglo-Catholicism on the Church of England.

David Phillips, General Secretary of Church Society, opened the conference on Friday afternoon with a bible exposition of 2 Peter 1. Following a short break, David then spoke about the origins of Tractarianism and the evangelical response to it. Its roots can be traced to 1833 when the Irish Bill (which abolished two Archbishoprics and eight Bishoprics in Ireland) stirred into action a group of men (including Keble, Newman and Froude) who had become increasingly resentful of state interference in church affairs. In 1833 they issued the first of their Oxford Tracts which set out their concerns on issues such as Apostolic Succession, Church separation from state, personal holiness and opposition to liberalism. Tract 90 was published in 1841 by Newman, which attempted to argue that the 39 Articles support Roman doctrine.

David then outlined the evangelical response to the Oxford Movement. From the outset, evangelical Anglicans could see the errors in the Tracts. In 1833, the evangelical paper *The Record* described the Tracts as ‘*melancholy and wicked Popish delusions*’ and William Goode’s publications helped to assure evangelicals that they were the true Anglicans. However, the evangelical cause was weakened by the bishops’ failure to discipline the Tractarians, and the Gorham case showed evangelicals that they could not take their understanding of the Articles for granted. In 1865 the Church Association was formed to ‘educate, suppress, assist parishioners and take legal action (i.e. test cases, to clarify the law)’. However, the Tractarians continued to break the law and eventually were imprisoned – gaining them public sympathy. Later evangelicals such as J.C. Ryle and Henry Wace moved away from ritual prosecution.

David concluded his talk by explaining how Tractarianism had been a disaster for the Church of England and Nation because it undermined discipline in the church, damaged simplicity in worship and led to many evangelicals leaving the church.

Richard Turnbull, Principal of Wycliffe Hall, then spoke about The Earl of Shaftesbury and his opposition to Anglo-Catholicism. Shaftesbury was opposed to Anglo-Catholicism for a number of reasons including his Protestant upbringing and his friendship with Spurgeon. He had also witnessed at first hand the spiritual damage caused by Roman Catholicism whilst touring Rome and Milan in 1833. He admired Roman Catholic piety but described Roman Catholic services as ‘tedious and ceremonial’, performance orientated and similar to opera.

Richard then described Shaftesbury’s extensive political campaigning in upholding national Protestantism (e.g. resisting Sunday Post Office opening) and also his contests with Anglo-Catholicism, including his attack on clerical vestments and the Public Worship Regulation Act of 1874. Shaftesbury claimed that he was acting in defence of the laity because of the failure of the bishops to uphold biblical church practice.

David Phipps, ended the day by discussing John Henry Newman’s concept of Authority. According to David, the story of Newman is of how ‘a good lad could go wrong.’ Newman’s early faith was

founded on doctrine and he resisted liberalism. However, due to various influences (including Richard Whately), Newman's doctrine of the church gradually changed. Even before the Oxford Movement began he believed that grace came through the church - Christ had left His church as the visible and present guide. Therefore, according to Newman the truth is to be found where the church is i.e. the Roman Church. Newman was able to justify Roman doctrine not held by the early church by claiming that the doctrines had always been there. David concluded by saying that the main thing we can learn from Newman is that if we don't teach the whole truth a vacuum can form and error fill it.

On Saturday, Gillis Harp, Professor of History at Grove City College, Grove City, Pennsylvania, spoke about the collapse of Anglican evangelicalism in North America. Gillis explained that there was much to learn from what had happened to the sizeable evangelical party in the 19th Century Episcopal Church. The roots of 'The Protestant Episcopal Church' could be traced to the 18th Century revivals, and by the mid 19th Century evangelicals constituted roughly fifty per cent of the House of Bishops and one third of clergy. Protestant stalwarts such as Bishops Charles P McIlvaine and William Meade had been active in opposing the Oxford Movement. However, by the end of the 19th Century evangelicals had declined dramatically. Gillis then explained the reasons for the collapse, including the failure of the evangelical party to replace evangelical bishops, the impact of liberalism on theological seminaries and the appeal of medieval aestheticism amongst the middle classes. Gillis concluded by contrasting the collapse of evangelicalism in the Episcopal Church to the preservation of Protestantism in the Canadian Anglican church.

After the Church Society A.G.M., David Phipps gave his second talk on Newman, this time examining his doctrine of Justification. David explained how the works of Aristotle, which had become available in the west in the 12th Century, had influenced theologians. Previous to the 12th Century the church had generally held to justification by faith – it had been quoted by fifteen church fathers. Aristotle taught that 'one becomes good by doing good.' At first the church rejected Aristotelian teaching, but it was gradually taken into the church through the Dominicans and then by Thomas Aquinas; eventually it dominated the universities and church. Martin Luther was the first person to attack this teaching in his 1517 *'Disputation Against Scholastic Theology.'* However, the Church of Rome continued to follow Aristotle.

David then explained how Newman arrived at his doctrine of justification. In his early days Newman held to the doctrine of inner conversion as a 'scriptural doctrine.' However, due to a number of influences Newman's doctrine of justification gradually changed culminating in Tract 90. By 1841 he had rejected justification by faith alone, partly because of his dread of antinomianism. By denying justification is of grace, Newman sold out to Rome. David concluded his talk by challenging evangelicals not to make similar mistakes by watering down our teaching of holiness, sin and judgement.

Rob Desics, vicar of St Timothy's, Hemlington, Middlesbrough, closed the sessions for the day by giving his testimony of how he had been delivered from Anglo-Catholicism to the biblical gospel. After becoming a Christian in 1993 at the age of 16, he studied theology at Lincoln. Whilst at Lincoln he became involved in the Cathedral Guild of Servers – carrying the processional cross and enjoying the splendour of cathedral worship. He then studied at St John's Nottingham and following this was placed at Anglo-Catholic churches in Ilkeston and Potters Bar. He continued to 'climb up the candle' and in 2002 became an aspirant of the Society of the Holy Cross and attended its 150th anniversary in 2005 at the Royal Albert Hall (with 1,100 priests and 6 bishops). In 2005 he was appointed to Hemlington and by now was using Roman Rites, incense, statues, candles etc. However things began to change. One morning he was reading through Jeremiah 44 v17 and the following Sunday during procession to the statue of the Virgin Mary the verse in Jeremiah, in his words, 'hit me like a train.' After this conviction he gradually stopped engaging in these ritualistic

practices.

In the rest of his testimony Rob described the changes which he had made to his ministry (e.g. starting a bible study group, Christianity Explored course and longer sermons) and the opposition he had encountered (e.g. three PCC members resigning, opposition from some parishioners, excommunication from the Society of the Holy Cross). He also described how several members of his parish had come to a saving faith and the great sense of gospel fellowship experienced.

On Sunday, after a service in the chapel, David Phillips closed the conference with an overview of the implications of Anglo-Catholicism for us today. David first explained why it could be argued that we should see things differently to our evangelical forebears (e.g. Church Association). In recent years on some issues evangelicals have been prepared to work with Anglo-Catholics (co-belligerence) in the structures of the Church of England to resist the growing influence of liberalism. GAFCON, FCA and AMIE have partly arisen from the practical outworking of this co-belligerence. David then discussed the positive aspects and the theological weaknesses of these bodies – ultimately we are in danger of conceding the Reformed, Protestant, evangelical nature of the Church of England.

During the conference John Richardson also gave two bible expositions from Galatians showing how Anglo-Catholicism, by adding ceremonial rituals to the gospel, is spiritually dangerous because it obscures Christ. The end result is that the gospel is eclipsed and people are led into slavery. John also talked about how his upbringing in an Anglo-Catholic church had led to anxiety and lack of peace with God, and also how we should view Anglo-Catholicism today.

In summary, the conference reminded us of how Anglo-Catholicism eclipses the gospel and that some of the issues are still alive with us today. We were also reminded of the nature and power of the true gospel in changing lives. There were also good opportunities during informal times and over meals for fellowship with friends and other attendees we had not met before, and also the opportunity to talk informally with the speakers (which can often be limited at larger conferences). CDs are available of all the talks (see back cover).

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