

NEWS : General Synod Report November 1998

Diaconate

The Synod requested the House of Bishops to set up a review of diaconal ministry. As practiced today in the Church of England the Diaconate is neither biblical nor terribly helpful. It is to be hoped that a review will focus on working out biblical principles in the life of the Church today (the Bishop of Ely and the Church of Scotland representative speaking in the debate both cited the way in which Calvin used diaconal ministry at Geneva!). However, it is feared that the Diaconate may be considered more in terms of how it relates to a sacramental view of priesthood. It is important that when the review takes place reformed voices are heard. If members have particular experience or have studied the Diaconate biblically then it would be helpful to hear from you.

Lifelong Celibacy

Synod also debated a motion on supporting lifelong celibacy. Evangelicals are often accused of so exalting marriage that we neglect the needs and concerns of single people. The life and teaching of our Lord, and also of the Apostle Paul, show us that though marriage is good, for the sake of the gospel singleness is better! In the world today those who do not indulge their sexual appetites are often looked upon as somehow deficient, whereas the biblical teaching is of fidelity within marriage and chastity outside of it.

Strangers in the Wings

This report set out a rationale and recommendations for expanding 'Ordained Local Ministry'. Several speakers pointed out that the report lacked any background theological work. This reflects what people have been saying since before the Ordination of Women, that the Church of England has no clear theology of ministry and is confused in its doctrine of the Church. What the debate highlighted was the fact that the theology of church and ministry that permeates much of the Church of England is neither reformed nor biblical.

Amending Canon 22

Where congregations use the ASB services they will find that at the end of 2000 their books become obsolete (apart from the Ordinal - see below). This will necessitate parishes purchasing some of the library of new books being produced and switching to the new services. A simpler alternative might be to buy a single volume, the Book of Common Prayer, or even 'An English Prayer Book'! Amending Canon 22 graciously allows hard-up parishes to continue to use ASB services. Of course, as always, they will need the Bishop's permission and the Bishops will have more grounds for seeking more staff to help them with the growing burden of administering their Dioceses. The main justification for this - 'we are an episcopal church'.

Extended Communion

Proposals for an authorised service of extended communion were progressed. (In extended communion the bread and wine are consecrated in one church and taken to another where a cut down service is used, because there is no Priest present. The cut down service does not have the apparently magical words of consecration.) It is expected that this will come to Synod again in July 1999 for Final Approval. If those who voted against at the first stage carry through their convictions the practice will not be authorised. The call for this service is driven by falling numbers of full-time clergy. However, it assumes that what matters at the Lord's Supper is whether a Priest has said the magic words over the bread and wine, rather than whether the people of God receive the bread and wine by faith. As Article XXV makes clear the efficacy of the sacrament is not in the bread and wine but in worthy reception in faith.

Series 1 Burial

The traditional language burial service from Series 1 has had a long lingering death and will survive for at least another 5 years. This is the service printed in most Crematoria books, which was the main main argument given for extending its life. It is decidedly unreformed.

The Lord's Prayer

The Synod had previously indicated a desire to continue the practice of printing in services the 'revised traditional' and the ASB forms of the Lord's Prayer. The Revision Committee had suggested and Synod agreed also to include the ELLC text (English Language Liturgical Consultation) in an appendix. The ELLC text contains the line 'save us from the time of trial'. In the case of the Lord's Prayer the ELLC translation is

probably best described as unhelpful rather than poor but Synod has now agreed not to adopt fully several ELLC texts recognising the narrow theology and political correctness which has prompted the work.

Ordinal

The Synod agreed to extend the life of the current Ordinal. This reflects the fact that work on the new services has fallen behind. The ASB Ordinal, now almost universally used, is a poor substitute for the much more biblical picture of ministry set out in the BCP. When the new service comes it is likely to reflect the continued theological drift since the 1970s. It has already been noted above that the Church of England today does not seem to have any coherent theology of ministry.

Holy Communion

The new services got their first outing in July 1996 since when they have been through a prolonged revision. They are now in final form but without the 'Eucharistic Prayers'. A more detailed explanation of these service is to be found in the latest edition of Cross†Way.

For those wanting modern language liturgy but unable to swallow wholesale the theological assumptions that underly the Rite A service in the ASB there will be an alternative. The prosaically named Order 2a is an entire, stand alone service in contemporary language following almost exactly the order of the Book of Common Prayer. Thus it is a Cranmerian service which seeks to enshrine biblical teaching about the Lord's Supper and is undergirded by the doctrine of 'justification by faith alone'. Those who have used 'Rite A following the order according to the Book of Common Prayer' in the ASB will find the new Order 2a far easier and more complete. There is also much more scope for including variety in texts, whether that be newer texts or say the BCP form of the Nicene Creed if that is better known to a congregation.

In the debate on Holy Communion the Nicene Creed was also considered. The Synod had already decided not to follow ELLC (English Language Liturgical Consultation) in one area and was asked to reject the ELLC 'was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary' in favour of the more traditional 'by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate of the Virgin Mary'. The proposal was made powerfully by Prof. Tony Thistleton and eventually the Synod agreed with him to retain the more traditional English rendering.

Archbishops Council

The Synod approved the appointment of the remaining members of the new Archbishop's Council. This last General Synod appeared to be relatively dull (there can be interesting Synods!). One member expressed the concern that the Synod was being sidelined. This may not strike some people as a bad thing, but since Parliament abdicated from its role of safeguarding the doctrine of the Church of England the General Synod has become the place where excess is reined in. The new Archbishop's Council will make it all the easier for the ascendant group to foist their agenda on the wider Church. In a wide range of areas the Church is witnessing a centralisation of power, a recognised sign of an institution in trouble.

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November 1998