

The College of St. Paul & St. Mary, Cheltenham

A Unique Evangelical Enterprise in Anglican Higher Education

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On Wednesday 10th May 1989 representatives of the present Church colleges of higher education came together to celebrate one hundred and fifty years of the Churches' contribution to higher education. Of all the colleges of higher education ever founded in conjunction with the Church of England, the College of St. Paul & St. Mary was and is unique in its tightly worded Protestant Evangelical Anglican foundation document.

The background to the founding of the college at Cheltenham lay in the rising tide of the Oxford Movement and its growing influence in the management of the Church of England's National Society. Francis Close, who was incumbent of Cheltenham from 1826–56, was himself an ardent 'Simeonite' evangelical who, like his party, was deeply committed to the Principles of the Protestant Reformation. He viewed with particular alarm the steadily increasing Romish trends in worship and theology that were being fostered by the Tractarians.

In November 1845 Close, who had already delivered a forthright public attack against Oxford Movement Church architecture, set his face against the National Society. Together with two or three hundred Evangelical clergy he left a meeting of the Society. Adjourning to a nearby coffee house they set up their own Society, calling it 'The Church of England Education Society'.¹

By this time there were already a number of National Society training colleges in existence at Battersea, Chelsea, Whitelands, Chester, York, Ripon and Durham. Close was deeply concerned that unbiblical Romish teaching and theology was inevitably going to rub off on the students who trained in these institutions. Indeed, his suspicions were confirmed by 'the medieval ritual' in use at the Chapel of St. Mark, Chelsea. He therefore began to set his mind to the task of establishing a training college that would not only produce academic excellence but would be distinctively evangelical and protestant in its worship, ethos and teaching.

The foundation stone of the new Cheltenham Training College buildings, costing £17,000, was laid by Lord Shaftesbury in 1849.²

Close was the driving force behind the venture and travelled the country raising £3,000 before any appeal was made in Cheltenham.

Having observed the way in which the Tractarians had taken control of the National Society, Close and his associates determined on an extremely tightly worded foundation trust document which would for ever preserve the College from high church ritualistic influences. This is immediately apparent in the original Indenture dated 12th April 1848 conveying land belonging to Miss Jane Cook to Francis Close and other trustees for the purpose of establishing buildings to be called 'The Church of England Training Schools'. In this document it is stated that while:

the particular mode, plan and scheme of education shall be left freely in the hands of the committee of the said Institution in conjunction with the Principal to make such modifications of existing systems of conveying instruction or such new plans . . . as may seem expedient, it is solemnly intended and purposed that the religious education to be conveyed shall always be *strictly Scriptural, Evangelical and Protestant* and in *strict* accordance with the *Articles and Liturgy* of the Church of England, *as now by Law established*, in their literal and grammatical sense; and that these principles should *for ever* be preserved as a most sacred trust at any sacrifice of pecuniary loss or temporal interest.³

Two important observations follow from this trust document, which is still legally binding on the life of the College ('. . . these principles should for ever be preserved'). First, the brand of evangelicalism to be practised in the present College of St. Paul and St. Mary is to be that form of it which Francis Close and his circle of friends practised in 1848. This is made clear by the words '*as now by Law established*'. Secondly, the quotation, usually referred to as the 'Principle' contains all that nineteenth century evangelical anglicans regarded as essential.

The words *Scriptural, Evangelical and Protestant* are in fact closely allied terms all of which emerged from Reformation Europe of the 1520s. To some extent they complement and expound each other. *Evangelical* was a term first used to describe the reforming movements in the Church led by Martin Luther and John Calvin which emphasized 'justification by faith alone'. The term 'Scriptural' derives from the *sola scriptura* principle by which the Reformers insisted that the authority of popes, councils and theologians is subordinate to that of scripture. As Martin Luther put it in his declaration to the Imperial Diet at Worms in Germany in 1521: 'A simple layman armed with the Scripture is to be believed above a pope or a council without it.'⁴ The Scriptural principle asserts that the authority of any course of action rests solely on its faithfulness to Holy Scripture. The word 'Protestant' derives from the aftermath of the second Diet of Speyer (February 1529) when six German princes

and fourteen cities proclaimed or 'protestified' their faith for the biblically-based Lutheran faith and church order. In other words the original 'protest' was not *against* the Roman Church but rather *for* the Bible. With the rise of the Oxford Movement in the 1840s and 1850s Francis Close tended to lose sight of this fact and launched into a series of vehement tirades against ritualism and Romanism. The phrase *in strict accordance with the Articles and Liturgy* specifies the nature of the doctrines to be taught in the College. The Articles are of course Calvinistic in character and framed with a specifically anti-Roman Catholic stance. Nineteenth-century anglican evangelicalism was thus deeply rooted in the events of the sixteenth-century European Reformation. Francis Close gave testimony to this fact as he spoke in his capacity as Vice-President at the opening of the new Cheltenham Gentlemen's College buildings in the Bath Road in June 1843. Referring to the religion to be taught in the school he said:

We call it the plain, honest, protestant Evangelical religion of the written Church of England. We pledged our integrity, that . . . we never would have any master or teacher belonging to the School but such as embraced the religion of the liturgy, the religion of the Homilies and the Creed of the Martyred reformers.⁵

The nineteenth-century evangelicalism of Close and his associates must be categorically separated from what has sometimes loosely been classified as 'evangelical religion'. Many nineteenth-century evangelicals in the Established Church had little in common with the later Victorian 'evangelists' with their anecdotal preaching and emotionally charged campaigns at which participants were urged to make immediate decisions to surrender all to Christ. The major reason for this demarcation was that most early Victorian anglicans were mild-Calvinists who, adhering to the spirit of Article Seventeen of the Thirty-nine Articles, believed that if the Christian message was fully proclaimed the 'elect' would appropriate their salvation without the necessity for any human pressure techniques. Equally, nineteenth-century anglican evangelicalism did not, generally speaking, adopt a Paisleyite hostility towards Roman Catholicism *per se*; indeed John Sumner, who later became the first evangelical Archbishop of Canterbury in 1848 since the Reformation, voted in Parliament for the Roman Catholic Emancipation Bill in 1829. Furthermore, nineteenth-century Anglican Evangelicals, and indeed their twentieth-century counterparts, would have had little truck with American fundamentalism which currently expresses itself in the campaigns of tele-evangelists such as Shuler, Swaggart and Jim and Tammy Bakker. 'Fundamentalism' which has an intensely literal view of the Bible spent much powder and shot fighting Darwin and Evolutionary theory. Their struggles culminated in the celebrated Monkeyville

Trial of 1925 at which William Jennings Bryant declared that if the Bible had taught that Jonah had swallowed the whale he would have believed it! In contrast, some of the early Victorian Evangelical Anglicans were among the first to part with a scientific approach to the book of Genesis, witness John Sumner who wrote in 1816:

the account of the creation given by Moses does not profess to furnish anything like a systematic scheme or elaborate detail of the mode in which the materials of the earth were brought to their actual form and situation.⁶

The Evangelical Anglicanism of the College of St. Paul and St. Mary

As has been noted the brand of evangelical Anglicanism which is required in the present College of St. Paul and St. Mary is that practised by Francis Close and his associates in the 1840s. One of the problems which has therefore faced the present generation of governors ('fellows') has been to try to establish precisely what this means. It is fair to say that there is a general consensus that it must include the following: Justification by faith, Biblical Inspiration, Personal religion, Protestant Faith and Worship and an active Social Concern.

Justification by Faith

This central Reformation doctrine denotes the process by which an individual is made (*faceo*) right (just) with God. As Newman and other Oxford movement leaders began to reaffirm the mediaeval teaching that 'justification' is a life-long process initiated by baptism and sustained by an obedient life nurtured by the Church's sacramental system, nineteenth-century anglican evangelicals became insistent on the Reformation teaching that justification was through faith in Christ alone. As Bishop John Sumner of Chester put it succinctly in his charge of 1841:

The scriptural truth is as clear as it is simple . . . faith alone can justify, faith alone can appropriate to us that remedy which God has appointed for the healing of our plague.⁷

The Bible is a Divinely Inspired Book

This conviction which was universally held by the early Christian churches was lost in the Middle Ages but then emphatically reasserted by the Reformation and Luther's *Sola Scriptura*. The Church of England Articles describe the Bible as 'God's written word'. Nineteenth-century evangelical anglicans were insistent that the Bible was more than a book penned by men; it was also in their view inspired by God. The celebrated Thomas Scott (1747-1821) of Aston Sandford maintained that the biblical authors:

wrote indeed in such language, as their different talents, educations, habits and associations suggested, or rendered natural to them; but the Holy Spirit . . . superintended them . . . to all which best suited their several subjects.⁸

Daniel Wilson, Bishop of Calcutta, wrote similarly that the Holy Spirit 'suggested and dictated the truths delivered' but 'left the writers to describe the matter revealed in their own way'. Again, Charles Simeon (1759–1836), fellow of King's College Cambridge and the acknowledged leader of the evangelical party in the established Church during the first four decades of the nineteenth-century, contended similarly that 'the scripture was written by God'.⁹

Personal Religion

Not only did Evangelical Anglicans assert that the Holy Spirit influenced the writers of the scripture, they believed that the same Holy Spirit of God could speak personally and existentially to the individual Christian believer. This 'personal religion' in which the individual shared the whole of life's experiences with Christ was the very hearthstone of all evangelical religion. Its roots which are found in early Christianity and in the writings of certain mediaeval mystics such as Bernard of Clairvaux and Thomas à Kempis were firmly re-established by Thomas Cranmer and the Protestant reformers and the 'religion of the heart and spirit' proclaimed by John Wesley. Nineteenth-century personal religion found its classic expression in William Wilberforce's *Practical View* which sold seventy five thousand copies in its first five months of publication and eventually went through fifteen editions; and Bishop John Ryle's *Evangelical Religion* which also enjoyed widespread popularity. At one point in this latter volume Ryle pinpoints some significant aspects of this personal religion:

A leading feature of evangelical religion is the high place which is assigned to the inward work of the Holy Spirit in the heart of man . . . there can be no real conversion to God, no new creation in Christ, no new birth of the Spirit, where there is nothing felt within. We hold that the witness of the Spirit, however much it may be abused, is a real thing.¹⁰

Protestant Faith and Worship

The evangelicals strove always for a faith that was plain and worship that was unpretentious. This was why they clung so urgently to the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion because they viewed them as a straightforward explanation of essential Christian doctrine direct from the Reformation. As Charles Simeon put it: 'The Articles are an authorised exposition of the sense in which all [the church's]

members profess to understand the scriptures.’ The complementary evangelical taste for simplicity of worship was well put by Bishop Ryle in his *Evangelical Religion*.

But we steadily maintain that simplicity should be the grand characteristic of Christian worship. We firmly believe that the tendency to excessive ornament, and theatrical ceremonial, is to defeat the primary aim for which worship was established, to draw men to Christ.¹¹

Social Action

Inheriting the legacy of John Wesley who styled himself ‘God’s steward of the poor’, nineteenth-century Anglican Evangelicals were staunchly and energetically committed to social action. Lord Shaftesbury who laid the foundation stone of the first College buildings in Swindon Road, asserted in 1884 that ‘the most philanthropic movements of the century have sprung from the Evangelicals’. Certainly their record was impressive by any standards and included the anti-slavery campaigns led by William Wilberforce; mining and factory reforms pioneered by Shaftesbury; educational work including the building of schools and colleges inspired by Francis Close and the Sumner brothers; nursing and public health developed by Florence Nightingale, to say nothing of temperance campaigning, prison reform and visiting; improving the status of women and the promotion of child care and orphanages. Dr. Kathleen Heaseman in her book *Evangelicals in Action* has justly claimed that nineteenth-century Evangelical social reformers laid the foundations of the twentieth-century welfare state.¹²

Postscript

This 1989 year of celebrating one hundred and fifty years of Church involvement in higher education is a crucial year for the College of St. Paul and St. Mary. Under a government directive it moves in the next twelve months into a formal union with the Gloucestershire College of Arts and Technology (GLOSCAT) to form an institution of more than three thousand undergraduate students. Although the foundation ‘Principle’ of the College of St. Paul and St. Mary is to be carried over into the new institution, many crucial questions clearly remain.

Will the College, for example, be able to offer the ‘required’ distinctively evangelical perspective in religious studies? Can it develop evangelical perspectives on educational and moral issues? Or again, will it be able to sustain an active evangelical social concern particularly for the disadvantaged and ‘liminal’ elements of society?

Perhaps at this critical moment in time, the College needs to keep before it Francis Close’s own forthright ideal. Preaching in the spring of 1848 he declared:

Churchman

It is to be—mark this—a Church of England training school, unconnected with any diocese, unconnected with any territory, based on Evangelical principles and from first to last conducted on those principles.¹³

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NOTES

- 1 Burgess H.J. *Enterprise in Education* (S.P.C.K. 1958) p.142.
- 2 *Ibid.* p.119.
- 3 *Indenture Conveying Land belonging to Miss Jane Cook* 12th April 1848. (Archives of the College of St. Paul and St. Mary).
- 4 See Bainton R. *Martin Luther* p.116–117.
- 5 *Cheltenham Journal* 26th June 1843. See also Morgan M.C. *Cheltenham College—The First Hundred Years* (Sadler 1968) p.5.
- 6 Sumner J.B. *Treatise of the Records of Creation* (1816) Vol.1 p.269.
- 7 Sumner J.B. *A Charge delivered to the Clergy of the Diocese of Chester* (1841).
- 8 Cited by Pollard A. 'Anglican Evangelical Views of the Bible 1800–1850' *Churchman* Vol.74 No. 3 (1960).
- 9 Cited by Rossman D. *Evangelicals and Culture* (Croom Helm 1984) p.40.
- 10 Ryle J.C. 'Evangelical Religion' *Knots Untied* (C.J. Thyme 1898) p.6.
- 11 *Ibid* p.13.
- 12 Heaseman K. *Evangelicals in Action* (Geoffrey Bles 1962) p.295.
- 13 Close F. *The Pulpit. A Sermon by the Rev. Francis Close M.A.* 12th May 1848.