

Editorial

What is the meaning of ecclesiastical discipline in the modern Church? However much certain sections of the Anglican Communion may deplore it, there has for long been a noticeable gap on this issue between matters of faith and matters of order. On matters of faith there is no longer any discipline at all. Attempts to unfrock or even to reprimand clergymen for not believing in articles of the Creed, or for doubting the truth of the Scriptures on some other matter (creation, for example), were infrequent in the last century, though certain cases became notorious. Today it is not uncommon to find even bishops whose faith is less than strictly orthodox, and heresy trials are no longer part of living memory.

On matters of order though, things are rather different. Until fairly recently a clergyman could be disciplined for refusing to baptize a parishioner's baby, and divorce is still a bar to ordination, if not to parish ministry. At least one instance has come to light recently in which a clergyperson waited for ordination—and then promptly sued for divorce! It was a clever move—had the divorce gone through, or even been initiated beforehand, the ordination presumably would not have taken place. Nevertheless, despite such glaring inconsistencies, we must at least recognize that some form of discipline is still being exercised at this level.

Indeed, there are worrying signs that in certain areas discipline may be drawn tighter in a way which will inconvenience mainly those who prefer to accept the Scriptures as they have been traditionally interpreted as their standard of faith and practice. Not long ago, a mainstream Protestant church in North America made it plain that it had no room in its ranks for ministers who could not accept the ordination of women. This decision was taken in spite of the conscience clause inserted in the legislation which allowed women to be ordained in the first place. The authorities merely assumed that the transitional period which that clause was thought to cover had come to an end, and that the clause should therefore no longer apply! At the same time it was made quite clear that practising homosexuals would also have to be accepted by everyone—no discrimination was to be permitted in this area either!

The Church of England is not yet fully aware that the same fate awaits it in the not too distant future. We may assume that the ordination of women will be accompanied by all kinds of safeguards, but behind the scenes the new majority will be working to ensure that opponents of the move will be reduced in twenty years or so to a minority whose wishes can safely be overruled. Positive discrimination, which is already a reality in theological colleges, which have to have a

woman on the staff if they are to be accepted as training women, will spread as quickly and as unofficially as possible to all areas of the Church's life and administration. Pressure will doubtless be applied in subtle ways to influence parishes opposed to the idea. A bishop could quite easily take along a few women when he visits, for example, and impose them on the congregation almost without anyone noticing. Already, no clergyman known to be an opponent of women's ordination will be made a diocesan bishop, and understandably so. After all, it would be most inconvenient if one or two dioceses were to stand out against the move when it comes, and embarrassing if a man was forced to resign over the issue. Better to wait a few years, and let the opposition go by natural means.

Moves are already being taken which will marginalize opponents to the ordination of women in the not too distant future, and once that happens, it is almost inconceivable that their legal rights will be readily protected. A few stubborn diehards will survive, either by stealth or by the fortunate circumstance of being in a supportive congregation, or by virtue of being in a remote country living. But let there be no mistake—the rest will be squeezed out by the apostles of fairness and non-discrimination.

It should be pointed out here that the issue of women's ordination is only one example of the new trend. The same pattern applies to any question on which the Church's leadership has one position and a significant body of traditionalist opinion has another. The Anglican Church in Canada has just beaten down a challenge from members of the laity, who were complaining that ordinations and consecrations using the new Book of Alternative Services were invalid. Probably the real motive behind this was a desire to ensure that the Book of Common Prayer (itself a recent revision—1959) would not be pushed out of the door or be denied to those who prefer it. The controversy revealed that whilst some bishops refrained from using the new services as long as their status was still in doubt, others went right ahead, and spoke openly of their contempt for the protesters! It may be of some interest to know that the General Synod which approved this decision also dropped the traditional Good Friday prayer, on the grounds that it was offensive to Jews that Christians should pray for their conversion!

What is so disturbing about all this is that it reveals a new and ugly dogmatism on secondary issues, while the central doctrines of the faith are played down because of the offence which they might cause to unbelievers. We in England are hardly in a position to accuse the Canadian church of apostasy, given the disorderly state of our own house, but it behoves us to note the writing which is on the wall for us here as well. One may no longer be agnostic about whether a woman can minister the sacraments of the Gospel, or about what form of service conveys the sense of the mystery most profoundly, but only

about the Gospel itself! In the Church of the future, faith will remain a mystery beyond the understanding of those called to apply the law, but order will be maintained, whatever the cost. Perhaps it is not surprising that the conversion of Jews will be increasingly frowned upon, for is this not, in the final analysis, the very essence of Pharisaism?

GERALD BRAY