

Editorial

Who owns the Church of England? The question may seem like a strange one to ask, but as the traditional faith and order of the national Church breaks up, it is one which is getting harder and harder to avoid. The classical answer is that the Church belongs to the people of England, who are represented in its counsels by Parliament. Yet the fact that Parliament has not been exclusively English since 1707, nor Anglican since 1828, has long given certain elements in the Church a plausible excuse for denying the Elizabethan Settlement and for seeking some form of independent Church government not far short of disestablishment.

In recent years this form of government, now incarnate in the General Synod, has claimed more and more authority for itself, and Parliament has backed away from direct interference in the Church's affairs. Or almost. Much to everybody's surprise, a General Synod measure which would allow the ordination of divorced and remarried persons failed to get through the House of Commons last summer, and had to be re-presented to the House in February, when it was passed. The Synod was quite unrepentant—all the trouble, as far as the official 'Church' is concerned, came from obstreperous Members of Parliament who had been cajoled into voting against the measure at some ungodly hour of the morning!

The question of the ordination of remarried divorcees is perhaps a minor one, compared with the next bit of legislation which is likely to cause difficulty—the ordination of women to the presbyterate. Some have said that the divorcees' bill was merely a warm-up for the big battle, and a warning to the Church that a slender majority in favour of women's ordination might be seen by Parliament as sufficient reason for rejecting the measure when it is presented, as it probably will be in 1992 or 1993. In the meantime, opponents of that move within the Church continue to talk, not of secession, but of maintaining a 'continuing Church of England', on the assumption that the General Synod will by then have left the historic Church behind altogether!

Meanwhile, in the midst of all this, there appears quite a different claimant to Church ownership—the Anglican Communion! Anglicans in England have never taken the Anglican Communion seriously—as far as most people here are concerned, overseas Anglicans are either temporary residents abroad or the products of missionary work in obscure parts of the world. The idea that they should have any say in the affairs of the Church of England is simply not considered, and would be regarded as preposterous if it were ever

seriously suggested. Nevertheless, the reality is that we are faced with women priests from the U.S.A. who fly over here to celebrate Holy Communion in front of the television cameras, and recently one of those 'temporary residents abroad' was consecrated the first woman diocesan bishop—of Dunedin (New Zealand)!

It would be idle to pretend that these moves are not intended to have their effect on the Church of England; in their own way, the churches of various Anglican provinces are campaigning for their views to be accepted here, and if the Lambeth Conference is the most effective way of doing it, then so be it! The English Church is left with the invidious choice of either recognizing daughter churches which have departed from its own order, or of excommunicating them—along with thousands of ordinary, faithful churchgoers who hardly know what the fuss is all about and would probably be horrified if they thought it was likely to cut them off from their mother Church. Not surprisingly, our Church has tried to keep open as many lines of communication as it possibly can, and not to unchurch innocent people on the other side of the world. Yet how long can this go on, without fatally impairing the Church's own witness to the Gospel? It is unfortunate, though perhaps not an accident, that in the same week as the announcement of the new Bishop of Dunedin was made, the same Church of New Zealand issued a new Prayer Book, in which all references to Israel were excluded from the Psalter! Those who pay scant attention to the Church's tradition are unlikely to care much for its doctrine, and we must wonder when open heresy will make its appearance in some corner of the world, trumpeted no doubt as a sign of local independence!

In all of this, there is one aspect of the question which is never discussed at all. This is the possibility that the Church of England, in the final analysis, may actually belong, not to the (largely unfaithful) people of England, nor to the international Anglican establishment, but to God! One must always be careful when invoking the Name of God in Church affairs, but His total absence in recent years seems to be symptomatic of an underlying problem which has not been recognized. Has God revealed His Word to His people? Are we, who claim to be that people, obliged to hear and obey His Word? Do we know what that Word is, and (perhaps more important, in some circumstances) what it is not? Can we accept that there is a Gospel which not even the General Synod can change, that there are traditions which ought to be respected by everyone, at least until it can be reasonably demonstrated that they are wrong?

What is missing in the Church today is a pattern of obedience which is rooted in love—love of God and love of the brethren in the Church. It is not the first time that this has happened of course. We remember with sorrow the lack of love (on both sides) which drove the Puritan ministers out of the reorganized Church of England in

1662, and regret that more is not being done to heal that breach. We remember the lack of obedience to the Word of God which caused the Roman Church to reject the prophetic message of Martin Luther, and produced the tragic divisions of the sixteenth century, and regret that ecumenical discussions have not stressed obedience to God's Word in the way that they should have done. But the failures of the past are not an excuse for repeating them in the present, and the Church of England today must look the issue squarely in the face. In the words of the hymn, taken from Joshua 24, 'Who is on the Lord's side?' Perhaps in the stormy days ahead, Evangelical leaders will find the courage to remind the Church that our chief business is to serve the Lord of Hosts, and that if we do so in humble obedience and in true love for one another, we shall discover as the saints of the past have discovered, that we are on His side, and that He is with us!

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