

Churchman

EDITORIAL

For Whom the Bell Tolls

Connoisseurs of mishandled ecclesiastical scandals have been unusually busy lately, as the reputation of the late Bishop George Bell of Chichester (1883–1958) has risen and fallen like a yo-yo, leaving a trail of confusion and embarrassment in its wake. By any standard, Bishop Bell was an extraordinary man. He reached out to foreign churches and churchmen at a time when that was uncommon, and did so with particular reference to Germany. Even in the midst of the First World War, when the Church of England was often acting like a recruiting agent for the British army, George Bell was doing what he could to protect German mission work in India, because their missionaries had been interned as enemy aliens. When the war was over, he was among the first to get involved in pan-Protestant efforts to heal its wounds and establish international cooperation in the hope of avoiding any future conflict. That dream was to prove a mirage, but Bell was so close to the German scene that he was actually there when Hitler and the Nazis seized power in 1933. He had a ringside seat at that tragic circus, and was never fooled by it. Alone among English churchmen, he signed the Confessing Church's Barmen Declaration in 1934, a courageous act of defiance against the new regime and its pretensions.

Bell's involvement in the German resistance never flagged. As late as 1942, he went to Sweden to meet with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, an old friend who was one of the leading lights in an otherwise dark German church scene. Through contacts like those, he got wind of the plot to kill Adolf Hitler, and believed that the British government could have done more to assist the would-be assassins and so bring the war to a speedier close. At the same time, he was deeply opposed to the Allied bombing of Germany, which he thought was immoral for the way it indiscriminately targeted civilians, and when German minorities in Eastern Europe were forcibly expelled in 1945, he sprang to their defence. He had a remarkably ecumenical gift for spotting the unfortunate and going to their aid—Jewish Christians under Nazi rule, for example, who were ignored by

both Jews and Christians, found in him a ready and articulate defender. Unsurprisingly, Bell was not popular with the establishment, and it is remarkable that he made it as far as the see of Chichester. Some hoped that he might go on to become archbishop of Canterbury, but there was never any real chance of that, since he was far too independent-minded for Winston Churchill and his fellow Conservatives to stomach. It was probably just as well, since Chichester gave him a platform and a freedom that Canterbury would almost certainly have curtailed.

Given Bell's history, it is much to the credit of the postwar Church of England that he became one of its few heroes. It is hard to think of anyone of comparable eminence who has enjoyed such universal acclaim and admiration in recent times or who did more to further the cause of Christian reconciliation and reunion. Sixty years after his death, he continues to find admirers who appreciate all that he did, and who are prepared to speak up for him when he unfortunately cannot speak up for himself.

Much to the shock of many observers, defending Bishop Bell has become necessary, ever since an anonymous female, who must be in her seventies or even eighties by now, accused him of making untoward advances to her when she was a child of five. The woman in question claims to have approached the church authorities with her story more than twenty years ago, but she was not believed then and her complaint was ignored. No longer. Reaching back over more than half a century, she returned to the attack and this time she was believed, apparently without question and certainly without a proper investigation of her claims. As a result, Bishop Bell's reputation collapsed overnight and in some quarters he almost became a non-person. At that point, his friends and admirers stepped in. Historians, theologians and eminent people in all walks of life rallied round in defence of their hero. The case was reopened, a serious inquiry was entrusted to Lord Carlile, and the whole episode was condemned as a miscarriage of justice.

That might have been the end of the matter, but unfortunately the archbishop of Canterbury had already weighed in with a condemnation of his own, which he refused to retract. Citing his own integrity, and relying to some extent on further allegations of a dubious nature, the archbishop stood his ground, with the result that Bishop Bell's erstwhile defenders are now calling for his head. At the time of writing, nobody really knows what to think about all this. Is George Bell a modern martyr who has been done to death by rumour and innuendo, or was he the secret pervert that his shadowy accusers claim? Will more allegations emerge,

and what will be done about them if they do? If nothing further happens and the accusations are dismissed, will Bishop Bell's name be restored to the various schools and monuments that until recently commemorated his achievements? Where does the path of justice lie, and how likely is it that it will be taken?

The Bell affair is sufficiently unusual that many people will find it hard to relate to it. His contemporaries are all dead, and only a few elderly people remember him as an old man in the days of their youth. Neither his undoubted achievements nor his alleged failings are likely to make much of an impression on the average person today, and the temptation to let the dead bury their dead will be strong among those who may have occasion to consider what little evidence there is.

That would be a mistake. The charges laid against Bishop Bell are far from bizarre, and the way in which they have been handled should be a wake-up call to everyone engaged in the ministry of the Church. What has happened to him could potentially happen to anyone, and the law of probabilities suggests that it almost certainly will happen to some who are now unsuspecting of the fate that awaits them, even after they are dead. We must acknowledge that there has been a culture of secrecy in the Church that has enabled various skeletons to survive unmolested in their closets. Enough has emerged and been verified to make us extremely cautious, and in our modern age, with all its technological capabilities, the scope for abuse and the means for detecting it have both grown exponentially. Church workers are sinful human beings, and nobody would claim that they have all behaved with impeccable propriety all the time. Yet we must also recognise that public standards and expectations have changed markedly in the past few years. Public figures, including members of Parliament, are suddenly discovering that what they once thought was laddish behaviour of little consequence is now outrageous sexism, punishable by enforced resignation, if not (yet) by official prosecution. The Church still has a long way to go before it sinks to that level, but attitudes have changed and the power of angry women (in particular) has been affirmed to a degree which would have been unthinkable even ten or twenty years ago.

This situation is dangerous for ministers of the Gospel. Parish clergy and other church workers are exposed to potential abuse in a way and to a degree that few others in society are. In theory, anyone can approach a clergyman with a problem, or join a church in search of a community to disrupt. Our doors are open to everyone, and must remain so if we are to do our jobs properly. But as everyone in active ministry knows, nutcases

are never far away. Some people are mentally unbalanced, while others are disappointed with their lives and take out their frustration on God, whose representative is the local vicar. Lonely women can easily settle on a clergyman and make his life a misery by developing an infatuation that is neither welcome nor reciprocated. Of course, sometimes things go the other way. Inexperienced and naive clergy can find themselves helping parishioners spiritually, only to discover that their relationship develops in unintended ways. It is also relatively easy for unsuitable people to find themselves in charge of a Sunday school class, or running a youth group. Even with safeguarding procedures in place, complete security cannot be guaranteed and those who know what they are doing can often dissemble and avoid detection until it is too late. The poor incumbent of a parish cannot be everywhere all the time, and may easily find himself the victim of decisions taken by others for which he has to accept ultimate responsibility. Add to this the tendency in some circles towards informal worship, which might include hugging members of the congregation, for example, and potential disaster is staring us in the face. What defence is there against someone who accuses a minister of impropriety but who may simply be fantasising or seeking revenge for being ignored? In the current climate, where all allegations are taken seriously and every accuser is believed until proved to be lying, what chance does the poor clergyman have?

There is obviously an immense and urgent need, not just for a review of procedures, but for a complete rethink of parish practice in which every church worker should be obliged to participate. Those responsible for ministerial training must take these questions on board and insist on dealing with them thoroughly, even if it means delaying ordination for a year or two. People of dubious background must be weeded out of ministry, even if they have repented of previous misdemeanours and are now perfectly safe. That may be unjust in some cases, but better than a situation in which proven vulnerability in certain areas becomes the Achilles heel that brings its victim down. The moral and spiritual laxity that has been tolerated in recent years, and even celebrated in some quarters, must be countered and a much stricter discipline restored. The strictures of the past may have been onerous but they were there for a reason, as we may now be discovering to our cost.

Evangelicals have a special responsibility in this area, both to ourselves and to the wider Church. Just as we are the ones who maintain an orthodox voice in the face of heretical novelties that constantly threaten the purity of the Gospel that we preach, so we must live the Christian life

in a way that is consonant with our doctrinal position. A few years ago an Evangelical lecturer was appointed to a traditionally liberal Episcopal seminary in the United States, and there was great rejoicing among God's people that at last, the word of truth would be heard in that place. But sadly it was not long before those hopes were to be cruelly disappointed, as the said Evangelical fell spectacularly from grace and had to be dismissed. It was a tragedy for him, for his family, and for the seminary, but most of all, it was a tragedy for the gospel ministry, which has now been compromised, if not completely discredited in some circles, by his actions. We are not insulated against such things and must face the reality that we are all sinners. Perhaps, if this man had been part of a network of like-minded believers who could discuss these matters openly and protect each other in times of temptation, he might not have fallen. Who can say? All we can do is try to head such disasters off, as much as we can.

At the same time, we must also urge our Church leaders to speak up for the beleaguered clergy to whom they are supposed to be ministering. Too often, like the archbishop of Canterbury, they fly to the defence of alleged victims of abuse but are missing in action when it comes to explaining to a sceptical public the particular difficulties and challenges that the Church faces by its very nature. The recent Grenfell fire in London was a moment when the true heroism of the local church was on full display, but did any of our leaders point that out, or speak up for those sacrificial men and women who were on the scene when the need arose? Rather than wallow in discomfort at the odd scandal that afflicts us now and again, they should be extolling the hard work and sterling virtues of the troops on the ground, backing them up publicly instead of demoralising them still further. If they must stick their oar into politics, it should be to praise and encourage men like Tim Farron, the erstwhile leader of the Liberal Democrats, who has done more in the past few months to witness to the saving grace of Christ in his own life than the entire House of Bishops put together. This is not a party-political issue but a simple statement of fact, and our leaders should willingly extend the same generosity to everyone who finds himself in a similar position.

Finally, we must remember that human judgments are restricted to human affairs. Martin Luther began his reformation by protesting that the pope had no authority to remit the punishments of people in purgatory (which is what an indulgence was), because the afterlife was beyond his jurisdiction. What was true then is just as true now. Digging up the dead and passing judgment on them may seem like justice to some, but Christians are called to remember that we serve a higher authority.

“Vengeance is mine, says the Lord; I will repay” (Romans 12:19). We do not have to worry that wrongdoers will escape the reckoning they deserve, because we know that every one of us will face the same judgment when the time for it comes. When we look back on the sad events of the past several months, let us remember for whom the Bell tolls – it tolls for us, sinners saved by grace through faith and not of ourselves, lest anyone should boast, or think that he or she is immune to the wave of accusations that is breaking over our heads at the present time.

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The Editorial Board has recently set about clarifying the purpose of this journal. The new Mission Statement can be found on page 70 and we plan to include it on a regular basis from now on.