

# The Background to, and the Need for, Reform

By David Holloway

History offers few examples of an institution which effects its own revival. In the majority of cases that is brought about by a minority movement within its borders. Christianity was itself such a movement, so was Franciscanism, so was Wesleyanism, so was Tractarianism.

(Canon Marriott in *Towards a Christian Order*, introduced by William Temple)

## Background

At the end of 1992 it was clear that the Church of England was in deep crisis. Anglican Evangelicals were aware that a long history of doctrinal confusion and division had come to a head in 1984 when the consecration of the Bishop of Durham institutionalized fundamental doubts or denials regarding the virginal conception of Jesus Christ and his bodily resurrection. There then followed official uncertainty with regard to homosexual practice and the uniqueness and finality of Jesus Christ. The vote to ordain women to the presbyterate in November 1992 confirmed to Anglican Catholics what Anglican Evangelicals had known for some time - that the Church of England was losing touch with its Apostolic roots. Thus by the end of 1992 a number of fundamental issues relating to the future of the Church of England had come on to the agenda. For Evangelicals the first issue to be addressed was money.

On 10 December 1992 a group of parochial clergy from across the nation and mainly from larger mainstream Evangelical churches met in London to discuss, think and pray about financial issues in the Church of England. They were discussing the right way forward for “net-givers” in responding to ever larger financial demands for central church funds - “the quota”. Huge sums of money are now subsidizing work that Evangelicals often believe is frustrating the gospel. More and more neither can, nor are they willing to, agree to these demands.

The context is increasing theological liberalism in the church at large; and growing bureaucratic centralism especially at the Diocesan but also at the General Synod levels. As a response some mainstream larger Evangelical churches that are net-givers are already “capping” their quotas. Others are planning to do so. The goal of this action is not merely responsible stewardship, financial competence and long-term viability but mission. The needs of the nation are seen as more important than the comfort of the church. The conversion of England in our nation’s desperate spiritual and moral condition is a priority.

Wider issues were then discussed on 20/21 January 1993. On that date another group of parochial clergy including a number who had met on 10 December 1992 but along with others (again from larger mainstream Evangelical churches) met near London. They were to discuss from a different perspective this “profound crisis” in the Church of England as a non-Anglican journalist had called it in *The Times* (18 January 1993). But the concern was for the evangelisation of the nation rather than the crisis itself.

The root problem was clear. The Church of England is losing the gospel of Jesus Christ as proclaimed in our Anglican tradition at the Reformation, as enshrined in our historic formularies, and as restored in Evangelical revivals.

The parochial clergy affirmed on 20/21 January that action was needed. The need was not to secure a place for Evangelicals in an ever declining Church, but to enable men and women, throughout the parishes of our land, to come to a living faith in Jesus Christ, to be built up in the fellowship of his Church and then to be effective for him in his world.

These clergy would have been described as “mainstream Evangelicals”. The 1989 *English Church Census* by MARC Europe distinguished “broad”, “mainstream” and “charismatic” Evangelicals. While there is some overlap in these categories, the survey shows that the only consistently growing segment of the Church of England is made up of mainstream Evangelicals. This group, therefore, felt the responsibility for asking the question, “how can we help the nation and the Church?” They saw three options.

The first is to “opt-out”, to ignore the wider Church, and simply to engage in a caring, intelligent, and thorough local parochial ministry. This was a strategy employed by Anglican Evangelicals earlier this century. The long-term result, however, was an unchallenged liberal-Catholic leadership and the present situation.

The second option is to work for “evolution” and to follow the strategy adopted since the Evangelical Congress at Keele in 1967. Evangelicals then decided to “enter” the structures of the church at every level and participate fully so as to “capture the Church of England” for an Evangelical gospel. It is now clear, however, that this strategy has resulted in many Evangelicals being captured by the Church of England and themselves appearing ineffective for Jesus Christ.

The third option is to work for “Reform” - not through the centre but through the parishes and congregations of our land - the grass roots - committed together and helping each other. This is a policy of deliberate and, where necessary, revolutionary change from the “bottom”. The parochial clergy that met on 20/21 January were convinced that the only hope for the Church of England was in such Reform.

On the 1/2 February 1993 a conference for mainstream Evangelicals was convened at Swanwick to discuss the November 1992 vote in the General Synod on the ordination of women and its consequences for Evangelicals opposed to women’s ordination.

Some of the clergy present at the previous two meetings were also present at this conference. Again it was clear that the issue of women’s ordination was only a presenting problem. This was seen from the formal resolutions. After various resolutions relating to women’s ordination had been passed, the conference finally voted for an “association of reforming Evangelicals to evangelise the nation and for the biblical Reform of the Church of England”.

Following on these three meetings a group of us, mostly from larger churches around the country, from the mainstream Evangelical tradition and representing these interests, met together in London to consider action on 22 February 1993. We established *Reform*. The following is an outline of our consensus.

### **Consensus**

Our goal is obedience to the great commission of Jesus Christ:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me, go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age (Matt 28.18-20).

Others describe us as Anglican Evangelicals. We are less concerned with labels and more concerned with beliefs and commitments. However, we believe that God has called us to work within the reformed tradition of the Church of England. But we are most definitely Christian first, Evangelical second, and Anglican third. Our basis of faith is found in Canon A 5, *Of the Doctrine of the Church of England*.

The Doctrine of the Church of England is grounded in the Holy Scriptures, and in such teaching of the Ancient Fathers and Councils of the Church as are agreeable to the said Scriptures. In particular such doctrine is to be found in the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, the Book of Common Prayer, and the Ordinal.

This reflects the moderate reformed tradition of our Anglican forefathers - a tradition that we believe is a faithful exposition of the Apostolic Faith. It sees the Bible as the supreme authority. It agrees that the Bible, to avoid wrong private interpretation, is to be read through the lens of the first four General Councils and the interpretation of the early Fathers; but if such a reading challenged those Fathers, the Scriptural truth rather than the patristic interpretation was to be accepted. Thus the church is to be subordinate to the Bible and the Bible has to be interpreted as a whole. Article 20 says:

it is not lawful for the church to ordain any thing that is contrary to God's Word written, neither may it so expound one place of Scripture that it be repugnant to another.

Nor in terms of its broad outline is this difficult as there is a "perspicuity" to the Bible. We recognise there will always be hermeneutical tasks that those gifted in "teaching" can engage with; but along with our Anglican forefathers, we believe that "the ploughman", or his modern equivalent, can read and believe what is fundamental. Cultural relativity relates to secondary not primary issues.

This biblical Anglican tradition, however, now appears to be rejected by the leadership of our church. The grounding of the Church of England is no longer in the Holy Scriptures but in the episcopate. R.A. Norris, the church historian, writing an essay in preparation for the last Lambeth Conference, said this: with the Reformers ...

... episcopacy had been defended as the normative, divinely ordained or approved ordering of the church; but the one absolutely indispensable mark of a Church was taken to be its continuance in apostolic and scriptural teaching. Now, however, episcopacy has come to count as a factor that grounds the identity of the Church.

This catholic element is now united with a general doctrinal liberalism. This in part comes from the "lowest common denominator" theology emanating from the Bishops. Through the introduction of a collegial method of pronouncement, Bishops' statements have to include every range of view on matters doctrinal or ethical. This, in practice, validates all extremes and all doubts. The result has been that Bishops now affirm or imply that denials of the virginal conception of Jesus, doubts on the empty tomb, and homosexual practice for the laity is compatible with Anglicanism.

We believe this liberal-Catholic drift is destroying the Church of England.

It is a fact that congregations are in decline. The apparent resurgence of Evangelicalism over the recent decade appears to be resulting in biblical men having a "larger slice", but of an ever diminishing cake. And that larger slice is still relatively small in terms of policy and direction. As Anglican Evangelicals we rejoice in recent gains. We are, however, concerned not primarily with Evangelicalism but the spiritual state of the nation. We cannot continue to see the church eroded. 2 per cent are in an Anglican place of worship on a Sunday. Over the 1980's Anglican Church membership declined by 15 per cent. The official *Church Statistics* for 1995 indicate that average Sunday attendances are declining at the rate of 32,000 per year - double the 1994 rate. Finances are strained. There is now a creeping centralism. This results in passivity among parochial clergy and parishes alike.

We have lost confidence in the collegial working of the House of Bishops. We see little hope from that quarter. The Gallup Survey for *Faith in the City* revealed that Bishops were perceived to be giving little support to their clergy. What, therefore, we ask is their function? Collegially there is doctrinal uncertainty. On a number of vital issues the Bishops are not protecting Apostolic doctrine and practice. We note the requirement of Canon C 18:

Every bishop is the chief pastor of all that are within his diocese, as well laity as clergy, and their Father in God; it appertains to his office to teach and to uphold sound and wholesome doctrine, and to banish and drive away all erroneous and strange opinions; and himself an

example of righteous and godly living, it is his duty to set forward and maintain quietness, love, and peace among all men.

Our Bishops have a sincere desire to be pastorally helpful. We would prefer to move the discussion away from personalities to principles. Our contention is that the structure of episcopacy in the Church of England, together with the liberal-Catholic (and now the liberal-Evangelical) drift, prevents meaningful “episcopate”. We do not reject a three-fold structure; but we affirm the original Anglican and catholic two-fold order. We affirm that Bishops are *senior* presbyters whose distinct order is political (“of the Realm”) rather than ecclesial. However, we believe the time has come to recognise that Anglican episcopacy as currently structured and exercised is frustrating, if not harmful to, the mission of the Church. It is in need of major Reform.

We have lost confidence, too, in the recent experiment in Synodical Government. The effect of Synodical Government since 1970 has been to bureaucratise and centralize the Church of England. It has resulted in the belief in the power of “votes” and the power of the centre.

The Church of England, however, being a voluntary non-profit organization has no power of sanction. There has always to be voluntary agreement and shared vision before joint ventures or action are possible. Least of all can money be voted in from unwilling donors. However, Synodical Government, especially at the Diocesan level, has become in practice an attempt at control of the Church from the centre; it often appears to be inhibiting rather than facilitating the people of God in mission and ministry. The result is passivity, a spirit of dependency in the parishes and numerical decline. Synodical Government needs major Reform.

Most important is recruitment for ordained ministry. At present the criteria for selection puts a premium on openness and pastoral sensitivity. We recognise the need to be open to and aware of new currents of thought and tragic human problems. We believe that persons gifted with sensitivity need to be exercising ministry in our churches.

But the great need in our ordained leadership is for gifts of preaching, teaching and communicating the gospel. Radical Reform in the practice of recruitment, training and deployment is called for. We are aware of sociological and psychological pressures that ensure a ministry that is theologically “domesticated” and that a collegial episcopate finds comfortable to “live with”. This must be challenged.

We see ourselves in the Apostolic situation addressed by Paul. We are, for that reason, not surprised at the moral diffidence, spiritual weakness, and consequent numerical decline of the Church of England. Paul predicted to Timothy that he would see people turning away from the truth. 2 Timothy 4.3:

For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own likings, and will turn away from listening to the truth.

The response of Timothy in such a situation was: first, “to preach the word” through “convincing” (or arguing); “rebuking” (or saying things are wrong when they are wrong); and “exhorting” (or encouraging what is good). Timothy also was to be “unfailing in patience” (he will not achieve all his goals overnight); and Timothy was also to be “unfailing in teaching” (Paul implies that a fundamental battle to be won is in the mind). But Paul concludes his remarks with these words:

As for you, always be steady, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfil your ministry.

We are therefore committed to a Reform that is “steady”. We intend to be “sober” in our actions - alert, rational, neither under-reacting nor over-reacting. We are also prepared for the cost of “suffering”. We are committed to a Reform that will provoke opposition. We expect

to be attacked, abused, and defamed. But we are committed to doing “the work of an evangelist.” We see the spiritual and moral needs of the nation as being so desperate that we must obey the Apostolic command to “fulfil your ministry”.

For these and other reasons we mainstream Evangelicals believe the time is ripe for a new Reform movement in England. Our goal is not to destabilize the Church (it is already destabilized), but to Reform it. We are committed to the Church of England, not as it now is, but as it can be and should be.

We do not define the Church of England as its structures but as its people in the parishes in communion through the “one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Hooker). For that reason we consider discussion of seceding unreal. We are the Church of England. In the event of any apostasy we would simply declare ourselves out of communion with those who had apostasized as was appropriate. That already is an Anglo-Catholic practice.

### **Change**

We are concerned for “the search for holiness, the spread of the gospel, and the cross of Christ; underpinned by the word of the Scriptures and the work of the Spirit.” We adhere to those reformed slogans, Christ alone; grace alone; faith alone; the scripture alone; and the priesthood of all believers.

We are committed to this reformed theology as it is enshrined in the Thirty-nine Articles, the Book of Common Prayer and the Ordinal. Where these formularies need to be revised they must only be changed to be more conforming to Apostolic teaching and practice as taught in Scripture.

However, we do not believe change to be necessary in any fundamental doctrine. Rather change is required in attitudes, assumptions and some structures within the visible Church of England to enable the preaching and sharing of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Initiatives for this change, we believe, will have to come out of parochial action.

We believe that there must be a recovery in the understanding of the “invisible” (or as the Book of Common Prayer described it) the “mystical” Church. At present there is a too easy identification of the Church of England with the Church mystical - the true body of Christ. We agree with Hooker where he said:

for lack of diligent observing the difference, first between the Church of God mystical and visible, then between the visible sound and corrupted, sometimes more, sometimes less, the oversights are neither few nor light that have been committed.

We see the denominations, of which the Church of England is now one, as forms of “scaffolding” supporting the true Church of Christ and not as fully identified with it. There is a provisional nature in all organised church life. We have no illusions about the visible church. We therefore believe it is our duty to work for the Reform of the visible church that is the “Church of England”; we believe it is at present corrupted.

Our goal is to contribute to its becoming a more “sound” visible church. We are fully committed to the concept of “sound doctrine”, but we realize that evidence of soundness is not in mere formal correctness, but in healthy, loving and Christlike living.

Our Reformation tradition is that there must always be reform - *semper Reformanda*. We believe we are engaged in a process.

We first have to reform ourselves, then our church and then the world. Our primary commitment must still be a commitment to evangelism - to seeing men and women won for Jesus Christ. Our conviction is that social action is a necessary consequence of faith. It is theologically secondary. So we must not subordinate evangelism to social action. But nor

must we fail to look for social action, good works and changed life-styles as evidence of faith. We must not confuse faith and works.

Nor must we neglect our own souls. We must pray. We must ourselves feed on Apostolic truth. We must read, not just refer to, the Bible. We also need to study God's word together with other Christians concerned for Reform. We need the ministry of the body of Christ. We see evangelism as a function not just of individuals but of the body of Christ together. We are committed to proper church growth and church planting.

Then we must obey! We must act together where we agree. The process of Reform is to change: ourselves; the church; society; and the world.

### **Methods**

We believe we must take action. Our first need is to raise consciousness and to develop networks of consciousness. The primary consciousness must be for winning the nation and its people for Jesus Christ. Our primary concern is not to "Evangelicalise" the Church of England so that Evangelicals can find a niche in an ever declining and progressively liberalized Church. reforming and properly bringing the church back to its reformed roots is a means to evangelizing the nation.

We are encouraged by parallel movements for Reform in other parts of the Anglican Communion. We note that a group in Australia concerned for the Reform of the Anglican Church have the following aims which we endorse:

Our long term goal is to reach the world with the Gospel.

Humanly speaking, the key growth dynamic in the strategy must lie in prayer and the recruiting, training and sending of Gospel preachers who will plant churches and build churches by their faithful commitment to the Word of God.

To reach the world with the gospel our long-term strategy will involve an association of churches.

This group further clarified its position in these terms:

This is not an organisation with a fixed agenda giving a panacea to the ailing church. We cannot know before the process what our common mind will be - this is the process, not the solution. But we do know this much:

- we want Jesus glorified by the prayerful preaching of the Gospel for the salvation of his people and the nurture and growth of his people and church.
- we want the world to hear of the saving work of Christ.
- we want to work with each other within our congregations and with fellow congregations to bring about evangelism, church planting and growing Christians.

We believe it is significant that many Anglican Christians are thinking along similar lines in diverse parts of the world. There is thus a wide desire for a "process" of Reform. This movement is evidenced at the "grass-roots." There is no desire to impose, from any quarters, plans and programmes. There is rather a desire to face facts. We have been doing this. We are now in the process of analysis before discussing solutions. Some solutions, however, such as "quota-capping" by the larger churches, are already emerging.

We are clear that we must return to an ecclesiology that sees the local congregation as the fundamental ecclesial unit, not the diocese. Article XIX says that, "the visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men and women, in the which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly administered."

However we are not “congregationalist” in that we recognise that the leadership of the local church, its ordained ministry, is not validated by each parish unit alone. It needs recognition from the wider church. We see the Church of England as a federation of parishes committed to “mere Christianity” (to use Richard Baxter’s phrase) in communion with each other and an episcopate. We believe this to be a fully Anglican, “Catholic” and Apostolic position.

Our movement will be its members. Their commitment is first to prayer, secondly to study, thinking and discussion of items on the reforming agenda, then thirdly action. This will inevitably involve rethinking, as did Wycliffe, Wesley and Whitefield, respect for parochial boundaries. In today’s changed world do these boundaries imply rights or only duties? It will involve rethinking how far Bishops are leading the Church in what is “lawful and honest”.

We are reminded of words from *The Position* of the North East Diocesan Evangelical Fellowship, voted on 3 September 1984 at the time of the controversy over the Bishop of Durham. It argued that "the episcopate to which the clergy of the Church of England can in conscience give allegiance is only the episcopate as it acts within the Church of England as by law established and therefore under Canon. Bishops defying the Canons can no longer *claim* canonical obedience themselves."

We find it significant that it then said:

new forms of organization may have to be generated “from the bottom” . A church so deeply divided in doctrine, embracing fundamentally opposed goals in mission and evangelism, cannot forever use common structures and finance. The structure and organisations of the church are to promote commitment to the Gospel. Commitment to the Gospel is not to promote the survival of the structures and organization. The goal of the growth of the local church for the spread of the Gospel of Jesus Christ should determine our priorities.

We see as other key items for our agenda the possibility of establishing our own theological training, action to reverse the inability to get parochial staff, and lay celebration. Also there is the need to take account of those Evangelical clergy in smaller churches and those without an Evangelical tradition.

We see the need for lay celebration especially in the context of smaller churches and the current damaging requirement for “mass priests” - something pastorally unhelpful to congregations and clergy alike. It is also uneconomical. It results in clergy deployment that produces “too much clergy for too few people” in many congregations, while other congregations are underserved.

We note with regard to lay celebration the words of a former Bishop of Durham, J.B.Lightfoot, in his essay on *The Christian Ministry*. The clergyman, he says, is ...

... a priest, as the mouthpiece, the delegate, of a priestly race. His acts are not his own, but the acts of the congregation. Hence too it will follow that, viewed on this side as on the other, his function cannot be absolute and indispensable. It may be a general rule, it may be under ordinary circumstances a practically universal law, that the highest acts of congregational worship shall be performed through the principal officers of the congregation. But an emergency may arise when the spirit and not the letter must decide. The Christian ideal will then interpose and interpret our duty. The higher ordinance of the universal priesthood will overrule all special limitations. The layman will assume functions which are otherwise restricted to the ordained minister.

We need to continue “consciousness raising” to encourage people to network along the lines of Reform. We need to hold major conferences on Reform. We should also be networking with non-Anglican Evangelicals.

We should be extending our concerns beyond England - certainly to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. We also need to keep in touch with other Anglican provinces.

We should aim for gospel preaching and teaching in every locality; a *ReNewal* of Christian education at the primary, secondary and tertiary level; and Christian expression in the media and the arts. In the year 1999 we could have a special celebration of proclamation, prayer and praise.

Practically there will need to be the setting up of trusts to manage finances, property for church planting, clergy houses and any institutions that are needed.

### **Conclusion**

But is all this necessary? Do we *really* need to Reform?

The answer is undoubtedly, "Yes". Nor is this just pressure from younger enthusiasts.

A distinguished Anglican academic, now retired, but still an authority on the original 16th century Reformation in the Church of England, recently wrote this:

it appears to me that the Church of England (for I have no right to speak of others) is, in almost every respect that is worth while, in a far worse state now than it was in the nineteen-forties. Doctrinally, morally, and in the understanding of its task as the *Church of - England*, the failure has been disastrous. What wonder that a Church which picks and chooses what it wants out of the Bible should become confused in its theology, flabby in its morals, and with little to state but the worldly obvious - the day after worldly liberals have stated it more convincingly?

(T.H.L. Parker, *Calvin's Preaching*, T&T Clark, 1992, p.x)

We need a Reformation appropriate to today's Church. Our prayer, desire, commitment, and finances will be to this end.

It was Malcolm Muggeridge at the Lausanne Congress in 1974 who said this:

I was reading the other day about a distasteful but significant experiment conducted in some laboratory or other. A number of frogs were put into a bowl of water, and the water very gradually raised to the boiling point, with the result that they all expired without making any serious effort to jump out of the bowl. The frogs are us, the water is our habitat, and the media, by accustoming us to the gradual deterioration of our values and our circumstances, ensure that the boiling point comes upon us unawares. It is my own emphatic opinion that the boiling point is upon us *now* and that as a matter of urgency Christians must decide how they should conduct themselves in the face of so apocalyptic a situation.

We are applying that picture of the frogs to our own experience in the Church of England. We do not want to jump out of the bowl: we want to warn against and, where possible, prevent people heating and boiling the water. For our part our goal is Godly living, church growth and changing Britain - all for the glory of God, in the name of Jesus Christ, and by the power of the Holy Spirit.