

SPECULATING IN ANGLICAN FUTURES

Jim Packer addresses the problems of the Church of England from a Canadian perspective

Jim Packer was invited to give an address at the Bishopsgate Conference of Reform, June 30 1995. The below is an edited text of that speech.

I am here to share with you Canadian thoughts on Anglican futures, with particular reference to the Church of England.

I formulated the matter that way because I had been out of England for 16 years. Perhaps you will allow me to be very bold and begin by reading Scripture. That's not the bold thing; the bold thing, and perhaps the cheeky thing, is what I'm going to do with it! Revelation 3:1 - John wrote, at the Lord Jesus' dictation, "To the angel of the Church in Sardis write". John listened and he wrote. I am going to invite you to think of that which corresponds to the angel of the church of Sardis in our English scene. These angels in the second and third chapters of Revelations, as I guess we all know, are the preaching pastors, the messengers of God (angelos is a Greek word which basically means `messenger' and in Scripture it is applied to human messengers, that is preachers, just as it's applied to divine messengers, the people we call angels). So think of this, as I invite you to do, as a word from the Lord Jesus to the chief preachers of the church in England, and just listen:

"To preachers of the Church of England write: these are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars: `I know your deeds, you have a reputation of being alive but you are dead. Wake up, strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it and repent. But if you do not wake up I will come like a thief and you will not know at what time I will come to you. Yet you have a few people in England who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me dressed in white, for they are worthy. He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the Book of Life but will acknowledge his name before my Father and His angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches".

And now I bring you my Canadian thoughts on Anglican futures with that passage overshadowing my mind and now, I hope, over yours.

THE CANADIAN CHURCH TODAY

At the beginning of this century the Canadian Church had something like 2 million adherents. Now it has 700,000. It's a shrinking church. It has never been the majority Protestant church in Canada and it certainly isn't so now - that honour belongs to the United Church of Canada. If it continues to shrink at the present rate - this, of course, is comparable to the situation of the Church of England, too - it will be extinct by the middle of the next century.

The Canadian Anglican Church has British roots and its Book of Common Prayer is the 1662 book slightly expanded. It has American links and for the last 30 years has taken more cues from ECUSA (The Episcopal Church of the United States [of America]) than it has from Britain. It has now a Book of Alternative Services which is much more like what has been produced for consumption in the States than it is like your own ASB.

Fifty or sixty years ago the bishops who led it (and who, even in those days, had the passion for collegiality that has infected British bishops during the last 5 years) decided that they didn't like a church of extremes and they were going to labour to ensure that the Anglican Church of Canada became a non-party institution and remained so. As a result there has only been a very small handful of card-carrying evangelicals and card-carrying Anglo-Catholics in the Anglican Church of Canada for the last generation and also, as a direct result, the establishment (I mean the leadership and bureaucracy of the church) has become non-descript Liberal. That is what you can expect to happen when the input of evangelicals and Anglo-Catholics is systematically ignored.

Whitcliff College, Toronto, was submerged as an evangelical institution for some decades. Thank God it has come back as a decidedly and resolutely evangelical institution during this last 10 years and, under its present Principal, it will continue on that path. Hallelujah, we now have at least the one theological college.

In the Anglican Church of Canada, bishops are elected directly by the members of the diocesan conferences. That procedure, you should understand, means that elections become, in a very direct way, political games. Very often, non-descript compromise candidates end up as leaders of the diocese. The Canadian Episcopate, like the English Episcopate, was originally conceived and managed in terms of selectors who were able to stand apart from the diocese looking for people able enough to fill the diocesan bishop's shoes. But in a situation where the diocese elects its own bishop it doesn't come out that way - some of the bishops are able; some of them quite spectacularly are not. Here in England you are moving towards the Canadian rut so I don't imagine this experience is altogether strange to you.

Last year, in June of 1994, what we hope was a landmark took place. An event in Canada corresponding, with certain adjustments, to Keele 1967 here in England. Seven hundred folk from three constituencies which hitherto had operated separately came together: the Barnabas Fellowship Constituency (which is the body affiliated to EFAC); the Anglican Renewal Ministries Constituency (that is the charismatic structure); and the Prayerbook Society of Canada (which incidentally has a very major job to do). These three constituencies got together in the Essentials '94 conference, as it was called, and a fellowship has been formed sharing a common vision for renewal in the Church of Canada. Please God, that fellowship will go on and something will grow from it.

So much for the Canadian background out of which I come - a background that has in it discouraging things and hopeful things, similar in fact to your background in the Church of England. But perhaps I need to say something more general about where I come from.

Ordinarily, if asked where I come from, I say "I'm an Anglican and I come out of Anglicanism". I don't hesitate to put it that way because as far as I'm concerned Anglicanism is Christianity and

Anglicanism is the reality that we call evangelicalism. Other positions are eccentric in relation to that.

THE NATURE OF ANGLICANISM

I identify myself as a heritage Anglican, or a main stream Anglican, on the basis of that view of things. I adapt to state my Anglican identity, words from the great Pastor Duncan of the Free Church of Scotland, who something like 150 years ago, said in answer to a question about his identity as a minister of the church, "I'm first a Christian, second a Protestant, third a Calvinist, fourth a Paedo-baptist, and fifth a Presbyterian". Well, I go with the first four; and then "fifth I'm an Anglican". And if I'm asked to explain further what is the Anglicanism that I stand for, I reel off eight defining characteristics of my Anglicanism like this.

Anglicanism is first biblical and protestant in its stance, and second, evangelical and reformed in its doctrine. That's a particular nuance within the Protestant constituency to which the Anglican church is committed - the 39 Articles show that. Ten, thirdly, Anglicanism is liturgical and traditional in its worship.

I go on to say, fourthly, Anglicanism is a form of Christianity that is pastoral and evangelistic in its style. I quote the ordinal for that and I point out that ever since the ordinal and the prayer book required the clergy to catechize the children, Anglicanism has been evangelistic, though the form of the evangelism has not been that of the travelling big tent - the form of the evangelism has been rather institutional and settled; the evangelism was part of the regular work of the parish clergyman and the community around him. But let nobody say that institutional parochial Anglicanism is not evangelistic and, today, I know the wisest folk here in England are recovering parochial evangelism in a significant way. Thank God they are.

And then I say, fifthly, that Anglicanism is a form of Christianity that is episcopal and parochial in its organization and, sixthly, it is rational and reflective in its temper. I make a point of that. I say that, in Anglican circles, any question can be asked and the Anglican ethic is to take the question seriously and discuss it responsibly. There are, of course, Protestant churches which, I think you have to say, are always running scared and as soon as a question of this kind - a real puzzle of our Christian truth, of the ways of God - is raised in their circles, they bring out the big stick. "Now you mustn't talk like that, you shouldn't be concerning yourself about that. Just stay with the ABC of the Gospel and Bible truth". Theological reflection is discouraged rather than helped on its way. That makes, I believe, for real immaturity. So I celebrate the fact that Anglicanism, characteristically is rational and reflective and believes in the discipline of debate and sustained discussion, believing, you see, that like panning for gold, the gold of truth will be distilled out through the discussion and the dross of error will be panned away.

Seventhly, I tell people that Anglicanism as a form of Christianity is ecumenical and humble in spirit. Unlike some denominations, we do not claim that Anglicanism is self-sufficient. What we say, rather, is that the Anglican way is the way of a person with an unlimited charge card going through a large department store and being free to say of every valuable thing you see and would like to make your own: "That's for me. Put it on charge". Anglicans have always rejoiced to receive wisdom from outside their own circles. They have a vision of Christendom as a fragmented reality with flashes of truth and wisdom scattered all across the board. Our business

as Anglicans, seeking the glory of God, is to pick up as much truth and wisdom (get as much help, I mean, from these scattered shards of truth and wisdom) as we possibly can. I am comfortable with that. I would be uncomfortable with anything else.

Then, eighthly, I tell people that Anglicanism characteristically is national and transformist in its outlook. By `national' I mean that the Anglican way is to accept concern for the spiritual condition of the national group within which the gospel is being preached. By `transformist' I mean that Anglicans seek, under Christ, to see the culture changed into a Christian mould as far as maybe. So Anglicans have always been concerned about education and educational institutions, and about a Christian voice being raised in Government and things of that kind. Please God, it will always be that way wherever Anglicans go.

All this sounds, I suppose, very triumphalist; but I do believe that Anglicanism embodies the richest, truest, wisest heritage in all Christendom. When people say "Those are fine words but everywhere in the west Anglicanism is sinking", I have to admit - in Canada, yes, and in Britain, yes, and in the States, yes, and in Australasia, sure. It is true; but still, I think, we may stay our hearts by reminding ourselves what is going on under Anglican auspices in black Africa. There the church grows and the gospel advances by leaps and bounds.

THE ENGLISH PREDICAMENT

That, then is the Anglicanism from which I come and which is reflected in all the rest of what I have to say to you. I said I was going to talk about Anglican futures. I chose that phrase deliberately because the word `futures' has become ominous in our Western culture since Nick Leeson sank Barings Bank. The future is ominous in Canada, in the States, in England, and in quite a number of ways. The Church of England appears to be much weaker and much less focussed in its doctrine, its morality and its sense of mission than it was in 1960. That year, in my reckoning, was the top year, the most fruitful year, in the venture which God brought into being, and in which I found myself caught up, for restoring evangelical truth to leadership in Anglican affairs

Things, I believe, are different today. I know that you, as the reformed folk, also believe that to be true. I look at the Church of England from across the Atlantic and I note how it was that the legislation that permits women to be made presbyters got passed. Without going into the question of what is right or wrong on that issue, it did seem to me, and still does, absolutely scandalous that the whole church should be required to change course on a matter of such importance because of just a whisker in debate. Just two people in the house of laity changed sides and so ensured the passage of the measure. Nothing without a moral consensus behind it, nothing I mean in the way of legislation, can really do any community much good. I remember the days when we had two orders of women serving full time in the church - we had deaconesses, and we had women workers. The pattern worked well, the women did a magnificent job. I frankly suspect that making them presbyters rather than holding on to the old pattern of deaconesses and women workers, will prove over a generation to have been much more trouble than it was worth.

And then, of course, I know even though I live 6000 and more miles away from you, that just as in ECUSA, just as in the Anglican Church of Canada, so now in the Church of England, the homosexual lobby is beating the drum for the ordination of active homosexuals on the basis that

what they do is just as good and acceptable to God as what any married heterosexuals do. There's confusion, there's anxiety. It seems to me that there are four positions here which have to be distinguished.

There is the extreme left-wing position which calls for full acceptance of gay sexual behaviour as the equivalent of heterosexual behaviour (apart from the trivial detail that it doesn't produce children).

Then there's the 'qualified acceptance' position whereby homosexual inclination is regarded as an incurable disorder and, on the assumption (which I challenge and I hope you do) that chastity is not possible these days. In consequence it is assumed that accepting homosexual relationships is the best we can do, the best we can make of a bad job, the best anyone can make of it.

And thirdly, there's the position which I call 'compassionate rejection': homosexual inclinations diagnosed as a disorder, homosexual practice negated, failures forgiven, help offered. Celibacy is held before heterosexual singles, as well as homosexual folk. Much care is taken, much help is given, much concern is expended, to enable singles to maintain a walk of chastity before the Lord. You can see from the way I say it, that that's my position and I hope it's yours.

And then of course there's a fourth position which I don't believe anybody in the church these days actually embodies or expresses - call it the position of 'hostile rejection' where homosexuals are treated as sub-human, as sort of pariahs, for having the inclinations that they find they have, whether or not they express them in action.

The homosexual lobby is at present in full cry, and on this matter I echo Chesterton in the Ballad of the White Horse:

I bring you nought for your comfort, No, nought for your desire, But the sky grows darker yet
And the wind rises higher."

It is going to get worse before ever it gets better; and perhaps it won't get better. The Episcopal Church of the States is poised to split over this issue, because some bishops are already ordaining practising homosexuals. It's a bad scene. On, however, the troubles go.

THREE POSSIBILITIES

So what are the options before us as we think of the Anglican future? It seems to me that we have three possibilities:

Option One I call 'pietistic acquiescence' - leave it to the bishops, leave it to the evangelical bishops, let them in their new-found collegiality decide what they like. We will put our heads down and simply concentrate on the work in our own parishes and become again what evangelicals were before Keele: Established Congregationalists.

Option 2 is separation. I would say to you, brothers and sisters, that in a divided Christendom we are always free to move from one denomination to another. We oughtn't to think of it as if guilt attaches to such a move. But what I do want to say with all the emphasis at my command is:

"Weigh the loss before you go". You think only of the gain, of not having to live with these particular troubles. Certainly going would ease the situation. If ease is a gain - I think the New Testament is ambiguous on that - but if ease from these troubles is a gain, then clearly you gain something by pulling out. But see what you would lose. You would lose a heritage. Frankly, I think that the loss would far outweigh the gain. So, on a basis of what I believe to be spiritual prudence, I beg you, do not be too hasty to go.

Option 3 is what, in the Norwegian Lutheran Church, is called 'the inner mission'. Evangelicals get together within the church, establish their own links of fellowship and joint action. They are together for the renewal and invigorating of the church. That, I take it, is the Reform stance at present - please God, it always will be. In Norway they have a free faculty of theology in Oslo University. If you're going to maintain a position you must have an educational institution adequate for its formulation and defence of it. We have it, I believe, in some of our theological colleges. In Norway, too, the evangelicals always have their eyes on tomorrow. They raise funds, they pray, they work, they confer, all with a view to renewal in the Lutheran church tomorrow. And that, it seems to me, frankly, is how we as evangelicals in the Church of England would be wisest to seek to understand our own calling and to proceed. We are the inner mission. (I think it's clarifying to say it in that way. I like the phrase - I use it a good deal these days). As situations change of course, reassessments have to be made, but the ultimate goal remains unchanged.

ENGLISH PRIORITIES

But I am here to offer you thoughts about specifically Anglican futures. I would like to round off, if I may, with the needs of the Church of England at this time: things to pray about, things to target, things to work for, means to the end that we want to see - the end of reformation and renewal and revival. Five things - just the headings:

1. A comprehensive holistic vision of spiritual life in the Church of England today. At personal, parochial, episcopal, academic and community level. Work it out, think it out, focus the vision, talk to each other about it, get clear what is the total state of affairs that you're aiming at. Always have a good look at the forest before you plunge in among the trees. Don't get mesmerized by one or two particular needs in such a way that you lose sight of the whole vision of a renewed Church of England. That is what Reform and all that Reform does is really in aid of. Start there.

2. Seek, throughout the church, deliverance from the liberal mindset in all its forms. It does infect evangelicals who cease to be on the watch against it. It seeps into the church in all sorts of disguises, but the essence of it can be focussed in a phrase: "the liberal mindset is that the world has the wisdom and the church must 'catch-up'". Instead, let the Bible set the agenda in terms of giving us the vision of spiritual life and the renewal that we long to see. Learn a counter-cultural approach to the dominant culture of the country and the dominant culture of the church. Please God, Reform will always be counter-cultural, because that's what's needed. That will mean quite specifically (because here, I think, is the most glaring point at which the liberal mindset seems to infect us all) restoring the Biblical understanding of sin - what it is and what it does; what it does for individuals, what it does for communities, what it does for the church.

3. Cultivate a passion for truth and wisdom in the great Anglican heritage of which I spoke. That rational, biblical, wise heritage must now turn itself to standing against post-modernist

irrationality and post-modernist experientialism (I think you know what those words mean. Post-modernity and experientialism are just two orchestrations of the anti-intellectualism of our time). But Christianity is a faith which calls upon us and teaches us, first and foremost, to think: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your mind". You can't be a faithful disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ, you cannot be an honest servant of God his Father, unless you learn to do that.

4. Let us seek in the church and in our own lives a passion for holiness. No movement that claims to stand for truth (I mean in the Christian sense) will have credibility if it isn't backed by holiness of life. And as we seek reconstruction of the church in terms of Truth and Gospel let us see to it that we don't fall victim to the secular idea that the truest path of human life is the path of self-discovery and self-expression. (Self-discovery and self-expression, I mean, according to nature as nature, with no awareness of the need for repentance and new life.) The gospel speaks differently. The gospel speaks of a Christ who renews sinful hearts and who by his spirit engenders holiness in his followers.

Just as you wouldn't send a bald man out to sell hair restorer, so we ought not to think of sending out God's truth into our benighted country if it isn't going to be backed by transformed living on the part of the messengers, which means all of us. Let us distinguish between Christian holiness and the idea that Christians are called to be the nicest people in Society to the ideals which that society has set itself. We are called to be different. We are called to be wholly different by being holy. God give us a passion for holiness.

5. And finally, God give us a platform for parochial evangelism in each of the parishes which we represent. Thank God for things like the Alpha course; but the Alpha course will have to be adapted for a working-class parish - it's very much London middle-class in the form in which it is being offered to the world at the moment. The point is that, where there is evangelistic need, platforms that make significant contact with people, get their interest, get their good will, make them willing to listen, have got to be developed. Different platforms will serve different parishes, but every parish must have its platform for parochial evangelism. Otherwise, again, Christian credibility is at stake. If, in our zeal for the inner reformation of the church, we are not seeking, through a renewed church, through a renewed parish and congregation, to win the country for Christ, once again credibility flies out of the window.

These are my Anglican thoughts from across the water, thank you for your patience in listening.