



Communicating a biblical view

President's Annual Lecture - 2001

Current Issues

LATIMER'S VOCATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY by Brian Carrell

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Let's be realistic. There is no way that Latimer Fellowship out of its resources can even dream of offering fresh solutions to the terrorism that currently holds the civilized world to ransom. Nor is there any way that Latimer Fellowship on its own can stem the tide of secularism that is eating away at the heart of many Western societies. And there is no way Latimer Fellowship can by itself successfully re-evangelize Aotearoa New Zealand.

As we enter a new century, and here in this set of South Pacific islands, in my personal view the vocation of Latimer could well include these four callings. There is, first, a vocation to call the Church to:

Comment

1. Recover transcendence.

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That is to say, to recognise the 'otherness' of God as a countermeasure to a growing bias in Anglican circles towards emphasising the immanence of God, (God within us, God present in our midst, God around us in nature, the God we feel rather than the God who is.)

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Alongside this set a scripture passage such as Isaiah 6, with its vision of God in majesty, high and lofty, sitting on a throne. Or think of Moses at the burning bush in Exodus 3, and the impression of a God before whom we find ourselves standing on holy ground, compelled to keep our distance and remove our shoes. Or read again the vision of God conveyed in the opening chapters of Ezekiel, with its startling science-fiction style depiction of God in glory. Or turn to the New Testament and the experience of the three disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration, reduced to silence when they observed the transformation of Jesus, Moses and Elijah as the glory of the Lord came upon them. Or consider the heavenly throne and the crystal sea described to us in Revelation chapter 4, with the twenty-four elders and the living creatures bowed before it and ceaselessly singing hymns of praise to God. The otherness of God, a holy God, God who is there, whatever we think or however we feel.

But what do we increasingly find today in the worship of many Anglican parishes? Growing resistance to the practice of General Confession, a reluctance to use the Prayer of Humble Access, an aversion by many clergy to preaching or teaching the raw truth of the crucifixion. Bonhomie abounds, chatter shatters the sacred silence spaces, we look for God in each other by the way we arrange our church seating or focus our energies on the fellowship aspects of worship. And many of the new hymns we sing are little more than a political or social commentary on the world as someone else sees it, or an exploration of human feelings and needs as they experience them.

Of course we recognise the paradox of a God who is at one and the same time both immanent and transcendent. But many today have lost one side of that equation, the sense of a 'holy God', a God before whom even at our best we feel we must fall to our knees, like Simon Peter over the unexpected and breath-taking catch of fish on Lake Galilee.

God is God whatever the emotional temperature of the occasion. There is an objective reality about God that experience may encounter but should never shape.

In the end this is the faith drawn from the scriptural record, often then confirmed in personal experience, but never determined solely by what is felt at any deeply spiritual moment. And it is a vocation of Latimer to be an advocate for this objective reality of God, a reality that is not dependent on mood or atmosphere. It is a call to recover transcendence in the worship of the Church we belong to.

A second vocation of Latimer could be to ...

2. Reclaim common prayer.

Here it is a vital Anglican aspect of our heritage that I am pleading for, as much as a biblical principle.

The essence of the Anglican way of worship is to provide Common Prayer. That is to say, to offer ways of worship that belong to all the body of Christ, orders of service that are not largely at the whim of a sole worship leader and therefore more or less a barometer of that leader's spiritual health at that moment, or their liturgical creativity that week. Anglican prayers and praise have for centuries drawn on the tested worship experience of the Church down the ages. They are authorised because they have a proven track record.

The assumption at the heart of Anglican worship is that congregations are entitled to have some quality assurance as to what will be the content of the service they attend. In some measure, what they join in should be able to be anticipated in advance. It is a denominational guarantee that what they will participate in will have its roots deep in Scripture. It will be worship that has been previously considered carefully and authorised prayerfully by the wider Church. One thing that means is that the laity will have had their voices heard and their votes counted in the shaping of these Sunday services. It is not left to the clergy, or to the Vicar or worship leader in that place. Above all, it means that the element of novelty on the part of worship leadership does not rate as highly in Anglican church services as the sense of common ownership of all we do and say.

But in some places we come across the opposite. We actually witness the disintegration of Common Prayer. The flexibility generously provided for in A New Zealand Prayer Book is frequently taken advantage of. I personally think it was a mistake for General Synod to legislate a change to a rubric in A New Zealand Prayer Book attached to the Form for Ordering the Eucharist. The amendment made this bare bones outline of a communion service a pattern that could now be followed at principal services of worship on Sundays, instead of being limited solely to special situations. When the Form of Ordering the Eucharist was first devised it was jocularly referred to as a 'garage eucharist', because it was to provide a shape for an informal service that might be appropriate for someone's garage on a new housing estate. It was never intended to provide the substance and shape of regular worship in established Anglican congregations.

Some other non-sacramental services may also bear little resemblance to any authorised prayer book service. The quality of some Anglican worship now depends very much on the luck of the draw as to the spirituality of the worship leaders for that occasion and the choral preferences of the music directors in that place. If you have a biblically centred Vicar, or a priest with a sensitive creative edge to his or her ministry, or a lay leader with a strong inner sense of liturgy, all may go well. But without at least one of these, if the principle of common worship is taken too lightly the service that results can be less than satisfying.

Sometimes practical considerations such as an after-church function, or pressures exerted by one or two influential members of the congregation, lead to reductionist worship, where everything is brought down to the lowest common denominator, and we find the Sunday menu offers little more than bread and

milk. In some instances it is a desire to compete with other successful churches down the road and beat them at their own game that contributes to the discarding of form or substance in worship. Sometimes it is simply capitulation to the spirit of the age.

Here is an opportunity where Latimer could lay claim to be more Anglican than the Anglicans – and in doing so win the goodwill and respect of numbers of lay people who are perturbed by the direction some contemporary parish worship is taking. Such a yearning for form and propriety is not without scriptural foundation. Even the Apostle Paul, despite his declared willingness to be ‘all things to all people’, also once had occasion to publicly urge the churches under his oversight in their worship to “do all things decently and in order”.

This need not mean monotony, or monochromatic, low-church dryness in worship. There is still ample room for the Spirit to infuse the prayers, to impassion the speaker, and where the circumstances require it, to diverge from the prescribed order. This is rather a plea to allow the ownership of normal worship to become once more the possession of the whole body of worshippers, not the prerogative of one priest or earnest lay minister or enthusiastic music leader. Common Prayer.

Thirdly, it could be a calling to:

3. Restore Biblical centrality.

Personally, I am troubled by the declining role of scripture reading – not to mention biblical preaching – in some Anglican worship in New Zealand today. Contrast with this what historically has been a key role accorded to the reading of the Bible in all Anglican public worship, at least since the Reformation. Over the centuries this has expressed itself in the provision of at least two lessons (an Epistle and Gospel) at all services of Holy Communion; and in the extensive use of psalms and canticles at Morning or Evening Prayer along with prescribed course readings of Old and New Testaments.

Now we frequently find only one reading at a Communion service, the Old Testament rarely read, sermons but lightly related to the passage read, no Bible or printed text in the hands of the people, and sometimes alternative readings from other literature replacing a Scripture Lesson.

Yet we belong to a denomination of Christians whose worship has been designed around the reading of Scripture, whose Prayer Book services are suffused with Scripture references, phrases, concepts and theology, and whose preaching traditionally has been firmly rooted in the Bible.

We are in danger of losing our distinctive nature as a Church that bases its worship on the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.

In some Anglican settings, more weight is given to natural theology than to revealed theology, that is, greater importance is given to what can be discerned of God in the world about us than what can be learned of God out of the Word before us.

Latimer should be at the forefront today of calling clergy and lay leaders to restore the Bible to its central place in Anglican worship. Here I would also like to draw attention to what I consider in some places to be a travesty of an Anglican ritual. I refer to the practice whereby a Bible is elaborately marched into a service, held aloft and flanked by acolytes, then later carried down the aisle in a similar Gospel procession – but otherwise largely ignored or neglected. It is absent from the pews; it is summarily – and often poorly – read, and more often than not it is side-stepped in the sermon. It is like being at a marriage breakfast where there is a picturesque wedding cake with an over-abundance of sweet icing

and decoration on top but too little fruit underneath.

Finally, I see a vocation of Latimer for the 21st century could be to give a lead in calling the Anglican Church to:

4. Reinvent Kiwi Anglicanism.

The Anglican Communion has still not come fully to grips with the changes of the last century. As a denomination we continue to operate in large measure as though we were still a church in Christendom, with all the ancient rights, privileges, expectations of public respect, social status, sense of self-importance, and assumptions that we are listened to by the State. Once upon a time these perceptions may have been true of some Anglican Churches in some areas of the world, but they cut no ice in this country today.

There is a credibility gap here that sadly few, other than the Lloyd Geerings, Jim Veitches and Jack Spongs of this world, seem to be adequately identifying. As a denomination, we continue styles of being Christian and offering ministry that were designed for a world that no longer exists. Even what some might consider essential elements of Anglicanism may have passed their 'use-by' date – such as, first, persistence in defining areas of episcopal oversight primarily in territorial terms; second, making 'parish' more important than 'congregation' and 'diocese' more vital than 'local church'; and third, continuing to encourage a clericalism that suggests that clergy by virtue of their ordination are closer to God than devout laity.

Our clerical dress also needs looking at, along with our variegated and often incomprehensible titles. Some over-bureaucratized administrative structures need pruning. We need to take a hard look at the priorities we take for granted in our theological training, and at acquisition policies for our theological libraries (including Latimer Library!). There is a need to think again about the way we communicate the gospel message, and what it is that makes a disciple of Jesus Christ in the 21st century different from one in the nineteenth century.

As Loren Mead has bravely suggested, it calls for little less than a 're-invention of the Anglican Church'. By that is meant the ability to carry forward into this 21st century all that is rich and rewarding from our past while jettisoning some of the cultural baggage that we have accumulated on the way. And it is no simple matter to distinguish between the two! Not being part of the institutional church means that Latimer Fellowship may be better placed to name some of these areas that call for a new reformation!

Some marvellous innovations are already being introduced, not always initiated by card-carrying members of the Latimer Fellowship, or by people sympathetic to Latimer's aims and objects. We need to be honest and generous enough to acknowledge this. Latimer members do not have a corner on wisdom, courage, faith, or even on scriptural insight! Take as examples total ministry at its best, many of our Anglican social service and social action ministries, the recent development of a three tikanga Church Constitution and style of being Kiwi Anglicans, the development and provision over recent years of a wide and rich range of lay theological training and ministry possibilities. We should be among the first to recognise and applaud these as good gospel initiatives for a new century, whoever has promoted them.

But sadly our reaction to changes such as these is all too often defensive, fearful, suspicious, and on occasions excessively critical.

I began by urging us as a Latimer Fellowship to set achievable goals, to aim at something we can hit. This still entails us being a people of vision and a company with courage. And it still allows us to build yet

wider and grander goals into our mission as years go by. In the meantime we have an obligation to be good and responsible stewards of the resources God has given us – the goodwill of the members who look to us, the subscriptions and donations they annually entrust to us, the endowments and property previous generations have bequeathed to us, the insights into the gospel which our evangelical heritage has handed down to us.

I believe that potentially Latimer Fellowship has a great future. We just have to make it happen.

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