

CHAPTER ONE

Fears and Fantasies

Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.

1 John 4:1

At first glance many Anglicans will automatically resist my thesis. Some will even be shocked and angered. They will see in this work an attack upon the Anglican Church and its leaders. Some will view what I have to say as an attempt to resurrect the “old” divisions that have plagued our Church and which thankfully have fallen into irrelevance in recent years. Still others will sense that I am only making a bad situation worse by airing these things in public.

While these reactions are certainly understandable, I believe they are unfounded and based upon certain misunderstandings as to the nature of Anglicanism. While I naturally think that the main argument of the book will serve to dispel these “fears and fantasies”, they also need to be addressed directly at this point in an attempt to clear some of the debris from the path for those who might hesitate to proceed further.

First of all, there will be some, especially perhaps among our current leaders, who will feel that what I have to say will only be rubbing salt in the wounds that divide us. Why can't we just agree to disagree and tolerate one another's differences as members of the same family? Surely this is the Christian thing to do. While this is an attractive point of view for a number of reasons, it begs the question of truth by assuming that all points of view have a legitimate place on the Anglican spectrum. I hope to show, in fact, why it is partly because of this attitude that we have ended up

in crisis. For those of us who insist that there is a right and a wrong such calls for undefined tolerance can only be taken as a way of silencing our voice right from the start.

Secondly, it is often said in Anglican contexts “Thank goodness the divisions that marked our past are now behind us”. Am I not then merely returning to the “bad old days” by wanting to address the whole question of “division” once again? Surely this would be counter-productive at this stage in the Church’s life. Strangely enough, I am in full-hearted accord with the sentiment! I have no desire whatever to conjure up our old “party spirits” which had us securely fixed in our various camps: “low-church/evangelical”, “high-church/anglo-catholic” and “broad-church/moderate”. These no longer matter in the way they did in the past. The old battles that were fought over what now appear to be trifling matters (e.g. the wearing of stoles or the use of mitres) have been largely relegated to the ash heap of history. This, indeed, is cause for rejoicing.

My point is that the current division in our denomination is of a wholly different order. It makes our previous differences look like a children’s quarrel. Not only is our unity threatened but also our very existence. Whereas we used to be divided on what most saw as secondary matters, today we are divided on core issues. I hope to show that this is indeed the case and how it has come about. Perhaps the serious nature of these allegations will encourage concerned Anglicans to read on.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, there are many Anglicans who are extremely uncomfortable with any suggestion that officials who hold legitimate leadership positions in their Church could seriously be charged with coming to believe in a different “religion” than that of traditional/orthodox Christianity. Have they not been chosen by the Church? Are not most of them ordained? Are not some of them bishops? Surely it is vain to oppose this leadership. After all it *is* the leadership. Does not the Holy Spirit direct the whole process? Should we not stop our ears to any voices which suggest otherwise? If we dare suggest that significant segments of the leadership have fallen away from the truth, even as a theoretical possibility, our whole understanding of authority in the church is called into question.

While such opinions are understandable they stand in opposition to both our history and to good theology. Our church was founded in the first half of the sixteenth century during the time of the Reformation. The latter was a movement which was partly a protest against a church hierarchy that had lost its way and become corrupt in the extreme. A widespread call to return to a more biblical theology went unheeded by the authorized leadership of the church and the result was a tragic but probably inevitable (in the circumstances) open division in the church. As a result, the Reformers, English and otherwise, were forced to re-examine the nature of church authority.

The English reformers, in their summary of the official doctrinal positions of Anglicanism known as the thirty-Nine Articles (BCP pp. 698-714), joined with their contemporaries in reviving an ancient principle about authority. Article XXI, "Of the Authority of General Councils" holds that when such Councils are gathered together,

(forasmuch as they be an assembly of men, whereof all be not governed with the Spirit and Word of God,) *they may err, and sometimes have erred in things pertaining unto God.* Wherefore things ordained by them as necessary to salvation have neither strength nor authority *unless it may be declared that they be taken out of holy Scripture.* (BCP, p. 706; my italics)

According to our history and to our founding theology as Anglicans, the final test of what we are to believe and how we are to live is to hold the matter up to the Scriptures, not the pronouncements of individual leaders or those even of the whole church. Our tradition speaks very clearly to this issue. As recently as the Lambeth Conference of 1968, the assembled bishops of our worldwide Communion once again affirmed that the church is under Scripture and not the other way around.

Thus, it is part of our Anglican heritage to maintain proper regard for our church leaders within an overriding commitment to Scriptural truth. This last idea will be explored more fully below,

but for the present purpose it is sufficient to stress that it is authentically Anglican to assume that even the great councils of the church, traditionally regarded as the most authoritative of church pronouncements, can err. From this perspective it is both wrong and dangerous to place church leaders beyond criticism. This is the tradition out of which I wish to speak.

A deeper theological justification for proceeding as I have lies in the Scripture itself. Here one discovers the idea of a “faithful remnant” deeply rooted in the self-understanding of the Jewish people. Again and again in the history of Israel the official leadership of the nation, often a king, not only fell into occasional sin but was altogether evil. Just because they were in legitimate succession did not place them or their policies automatically in the will of God. In fact, it is clear that on many occasions they were leading the people into apostasy and idol worship. The prophets were sent to hold the leaders to account for straying from the revealed Word of God, especially as spelled out in the Law of Moses. In the meantime, it was acknowledged that not all of Israel had gone astray and there remained a smaller group within nation known as the “remnant” which continued to serve God in spite of the official leadership. It was sometimes this stubborn perseverance which stayed the judgment of God upon the whole of the nation.

A similar situation is portrayed in the New Testament, especially in reference to our Lord’s relationship with the official religious leadership of his day. It doesn’t take much reading of the Gospels to perceive that Jesus himself regarded those in power as legitimate and deserving of respect but bereft of the Spirit. In fact, they often stood against the purposes of God. Ultimately, they had Jesus put to death, so vehement was their opposition. They thought that they were above the rabble who supported Jesus. After all, they were the rulers of the Temple and the doctors of the Law! (John 7:49) They had it so wrong that they thought Jesus must have been possessed by the chief of the demons. (Matthew 12:24)

This conflict continued through the life of the early church which eventually had to distinguish itself from Judaism, in part because of such inflexibility. And even within the leadership of the early church, Peter, the one chosen by our Lord himself, had to be opposed on the issue of

circumcision for Gentile believers. It was only after Paul stood up to him at Antioch that Peter came fully around to the truth. (Galatians 2:11ff.)

The Bible therefore gives us ample warning against assuming that the official leadership of the people of God is always in the right. Indeed, it almost seems at times that we should be *expecting* the leadership to go astray! As a result, we should be on our guard both to support and encourage them when we can and also to confront them when necessary. This is not an easy thing to do because of the inherent complexities in the situation. However, it is a necessary thing, not only in our generation but in every generation.

Conclusion: A Critical Path

There are, therefore, a number of good reasons to suggest that the path I have chosen is not to be avoided after all. There is much in our tradition that would encourage our taking it, even though doing so may be difficult. While it may not be necessary in ordinary times, it is positively essential in times of crisis. For these reasons, then, I hope that I will be accorded the privilege both to speak and to be heard. I hardly expect everyone to agree with me! As well, I speak knowing that I, too, am a flawed human being constantly in need of the grace of God.