

THE CHURCH'S REFORMATION

beginning with me – William Law

Is there anything new about our complaints of worldliness in the Church? Hardly. That has been part of the picture from earliest days. But the reverse is also true: time and again the Spirit brings about renewal through repentance and re-commitment, working in the secret places of the heart of those prophetic souls destined to accomplish the divine purpose throughout successive ages. However close to destruction and chaos the outer structures might seem to be at times, nevertheless the gates of hell do not prevail.

It is easier to look back and see the faults and failings of a previous age than it is to perceive accurately the signs of the times in our own era, and then discern and put into operation appropriate remedies. If we apologise for our unChristian behaviour in times past that **must** become a catalyst for action now so that history does not repeat itself. New fads, fashions and bandwagons in ecclesiastical matters are often merely old heresies touched up to appeal.

We can quite happily go along with William Law (18th Century Church of England parson and writer) in his denunciation of the behaviour of some of the so-called Christians who helped to colonise the British Empire. We are now rather ashamed of the triumphalism involved, and when we are not apologising profusely tend to brush it all under the carpet. But Law was speaking out when it was all actually underway; and it wasn't only the British. Most of Europe was tarred with the same brush and inter-religious strife, war and intrigue were the order of the day. The Establishment took it for granted and where was true Christianity?

“Look at warring Christendom. What smallest drop of pity towards sinners is to be found in it? . . . It stirs up and kindles every passion of fallen nature that is contrary to the all-humble . . . all-loving, all-forgiving and saving Spirit of Christ . . .
. . . look at all European Christendom sailing round the globe with fire and sword . . . to seize the possessions and kill the inhabitants of both the Indies. What natural right of man, what

supernatural virtue, which Christ brought down from Heaven, was not here trodden underfoot. All that you ever read or heard of heathen barbarity was here outdone by Christian conquerors.”

(from *An Address to the Clergy* 1761)

No, it is hardly something to be proud of. Yet these strong denunciations show the prophetic stance of a believer unwilling to sit passively with the status quo. Here are the seeds of renewal, the determination to make things different and to show the incompatibility of true Christianity with worldly political machinations. Maybe the worst thing was the infighting between Christians themselves. The sin of Christian disunity is not merely a matter of inter-denominational bickering. It hinders the spread of the gospel message itself as our Lord predicted in John 17. William Law continues in the same Address:

“What wars of Christians against Christians! . . . A world which should have heard or seen or felt nothing from the followers of Christ but a divine love that had forced them . . . through the perils of long seas to visit strangers with these glad tidings of salvation...”

The end result, as Law perceived it in its inevitability, would be the demise of Christian society and civilisation – *“such a Christendom will devour itself with its own weapons.”* He was not wrong as the state of present Western society makes only too clear.

However, Law also knew where true Christian sovereignty lay:

“The Christendom which I mean, that neither wants nor allows of war, is only that where Christ is King, and his Holy Spirit the only governor of the wills, affections and designs of all that belongs to it.”

An idyllic picture indeed which we would all in our better moments wish for. Natural human tendency though is to look for means of apportioning blame. If we have not attained the ideal it must be somebody else’s fault and so it is that Christians blame one another, this group or that, this branch of the church – rarely our own. But there can be no remedy without genuine

insight into our own shortcomings and the shouldering of responsibility. Once again it is **not** a question of mere verbal apology, of a lip-service repentance. The sin is real and the sorrow and restitution must be real.

William Law apportions the blame equally. No part of the Christendom of his day can allow itself to be “*holier than thou*” . . .

[This necessity of taking arms] “*is equally brought forth by all and every part of fallen Christendom, and therefore all and every part, as well Popish as Protestant, are at one and the same distance from the spirit of their Lord and Saviour, the Lamb of God and therefore want one and the same entire reformation.*”

(Ibid)

The cause of the evil is the same for all, the insidious entry into the whole Church of worldly ambition and ideals. (Plus ça change . . .). The worldly, natural spirit of humankind cannot, as St Paul perceived, receive the things of God. Therein is the battleground where incompatibles meet and this expresses itself outwardly in the inter-Christian feuds and fightings so endemic to the Church throughout her history. As Law puts it:

“*This is the natural man, who having got into the Church and church power, has turned the things of God into the things of this world . . .*”

(Ibid)

When this begins to happen then the Church becomes popular, and is accepted. The secular powers go along with it and use it:

“*And when this is the state of the Church, the wisdom of this world (which always loves its own) will be in love with it, will spare no cost to maintain it . . . and condemn every man as heretical who dares speak a word against this glorious image of a Church which the wisdom of this world has set up.*”

(Ibid)

So far so true we would wish to say, but there seems to be a stage beyond even this, a stage perhaps that we have now actually reached. The worldly spirit of the Church suddenly ceases to be its ally. Yet, having corrupted it, all the same it doesn't leave it. Rather it shows itself in its truer colours, as something other than a partly benign desire to go along with the desires and viewpoints of people out there who are trying to make sense of life. Somehow something more sinister is found to be there and to be taking over, something that needs redeeming. Law has this to say, so maybe he sensed it too:

“This is the great Anti-Christ . . . the spirit of Satan working against Christ in the strength and subtlety of earthly wisdom.”

(Ibid)

Meanwhile the Church half-innocently trots along a step or two behind, still trying to be relevant to a world which increasingly either ignores it or mocks it, not always without malice.

Is this then the end of the story, unresolved tragedy, the onslaught of meaninglessness, the loss of faith and hope? No, of course, though it could seem to be so for some. Law himself provides a pointer: *“true Church reformation is a departure from the wisdom of this world.”* We have to look elsewhere:

“The Church of Christ, as it is the door of salvation, is nothing else but Christ Himself. Christ in us, or we in His Church, is the same thing . . . that which He was, that must they be who are His.”

(Ibid)

Letting go of worldly aspirations and the competitive desire to appear relevant are the starting point. In a sense we may have to go it alone to begin with, stand out and be different. Humility, honesty, integrity, inner prayerfulness and communion with God must take over and refuse to be relinquished. Law reminds us time and again that finding Jesus in our own inmost being is the surest way of attaining to Him:

“What a folly then to be so often perplexed about the way to God. For nothing is the way to God but our heart. God is nowhere else to be found; and the heart itself cannot find Him, or be helped by anything else to find Him, but by its own love of Him, faith in Him, dependence upon Him, resignation to Him, and expectation of all from Him.”

(The Spirit of Love)

Should we ever find ourselves cut off from the ministrations of the Church, Law encourages us not to despair but to turn inwardly to the Trinitarian Presence. Prayer and worship in this inner sanctum can become second nature:

“When once thou art well grounded in this inward worship, thou wilt have learnt to live unto God above time and place. For every day will be Sunday to thee, and wherever thou goest thou wilt have a priest, a church, and an altar along with thee . . . everything thou doest is as a song of praise, and the common business of thy life is a conforming to God’s will on earth as angels do in heaven.”

(The Spirit of Prayer)

Such in actuality is the vocation of the hermit, the solitary, in the Church and it is normally from seedbeds like this that the Spirit causes renewal to sprout. So we can take heart since this same Holy Spirit has ever been at work even before the foundation of the church as we know it:

“All the dispensations of God to mankind, from the fall of Adam to the preaching of the Gospel, were only for this one end, to fit, prepare, and dispose the soul for the operation of the spirit of God upon it.” *(Ibid)*

Even the Church itself is nothing outside this working of the Spirit:

“This is Christianity, a spiritual society, not because it has no worldly concerns, but because all its members as such, are born of the Spirit, kept alive, animated and governed by the Spirit of God . . . the kingdom of self is the fall of man.”

(Ibid)

Hence our primary concern is not to be with which part of the Church we belong to, but with the denial of self, and the following of Christ in the Spirit, to the utmost:

“Be where thou wilt, either here or at home or Geneva, if self is undenied, if thou livest to thine own will, to the pleasures of thy natural lusts and appetites . . . thou art dead whilst thou livest; the Seed of the Woman [i.e. Christ, see Genesis 3] is crucified within thee.”

(Ibid)

Far too tall an order for most of us? But maybe God is addressing each of us individually, in our poverty, at this time of acute crisis in the Church. Should our response not be: “Speak Lord, your servant is listening”, however great and even valid our diffidence might be? The power is God’s not ours as William Law knew well:

“This Way is absolutely infallible. He [Jesus] is the Lamb of God, source of all meekness and humility in the soul . . . He is the Light of Eternity . . . In this twofold respect He has a power of redeeming us which nothing can hinder; but, sooner or later, He must see all His and our enemies under His feet, and all that is fallen in Adam unto death must rise and return into a unity of an Eternal Life in God.”

(The Spirit of Love)

If we can have a small part in this great endeavour what else would there be to look for in life?

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