

THE NEED TO DISESTABLISH THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND

NIGEL WRIGHT

The Liberal Democrats did the Church of England a service when they put disestablishment on their platform last month (September 1990 - ed.). Separating church and state is an essential step in the creation of an authentic Christian witness in our pluralistic society.

A few Anglicans have recently toyed with the idea of cutting free from legal and formal ties with the state. One suspects that with the self-confidence which comes with the appointment of a new Archbishop who is already commanding solid support, such discussion will now retire to the back-benches. As long as it can be imagined that there is some advantage to the Church in maintaining its established status, it will continue to do so.

It is sometimes forgotten that there is in British Christianity a minority voice which has long insisted that the idea of a state church is wrong in principle as well as being unhelpful in practice. True, some of the "free churches" are free as a pure quirk of legal fate: the Episcopalian (Anglican) church is a "free church" in Scotland. But others are free from state control because of theological and spiritual principle.

"THE KING'S SANCTUARY"

Wherever religious and secular powers are confused, corruption results, because political powers are always tempted to use religion as a way of legitimating their own status. "Don't

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prophesy any more at Bethel, because this is the king's sanctuary and the temple of the kingdom," Amos was told by the religious establishment. Subtly, the sanctuary of the Lord had been transformed into that of the king. Corruption works both ways. Any religious faith which relies upon political privilege for its position and influence, instead of upon the inherent power of its beliefs and the authenticity of its witness, has betrayed itself. Jesus relied upon nothing of the kind.

There are some signs that Mrs Thatcher is hoping for a spiritual and moral revival to parallel the political transformation she thinks she has accomplished. According to this scenario, an evangelical Archbishop of Canterbury is part of her benevolent plan. If this turns out to be true, her motives must be interpreted as political.

A religious faith which takes Jesus of Nazareth seriously will not be pushed into any easy ideological mould. It is precisely because the object of devotion for Christians is himself prophetically unpredictable that any faith which focuses upon him, which is truly "evangelical", must end up being radical. Dr George Carey, the incoming Archbishop of Canterbury, whatever his political views, should end up disappointing those who wish to use religion for their own ends, whether from left or right.

DISESTABLISHMENT MUST COME BECAUSE IT IS RIGHT

Meanwhile Christians who believe establishment to be wrong live in hope. We hope the Church will leave off from imitating the panoply of power in order to adopt the manner of servanthood demonstrated by its founder.

In the Labour Party policy review, Tony Benn, good nonconformist that he is, proposed that disestablishment should become part of the party's platform. His proposal was defeated, no doubt because there were higher priorities and such a move might alienate supporters. His proposal could be interpreted as another step on the road to secularisation. In fact the opposite is the case. It is a proposal deeply rooted in an understanding of Jesus. But can it be expedient for any major political party to promote the issue? If disestablishment is to happen it must

come from within the Churches of England and Scotland themselves. And it must come not because of impatience with a system that is plainly anomalous but because it is intrinsically right. And it must not be seen as a retreat from mission to our society and culture but as a way of freeing the church for this mission.

THE POWER OF ITS GOSPEL

One of the contradictions of the present age is that Christians who have historically been committed to the freedom of the church from the state have stepped back from their convictions. This is in large part due to the fear that disestablishment would contribute to the further marginalisation of the church, its exclusion from the centralities of national life and side-lining into private piety. Yet this is a defensive mentality aiming at retrenchment and without confidence in the power of its gospel.

If confidence is to be regained, the historic free churches must first rediscover their commitment in principle to disestablishment, which must be retrieved from their tradition and become a living issue for them. Having recovered their tradition, they should represent it with passion and conviction in the new ecumenical forums of England and Scotland, refusing to treat the Churches Together institutions as anodyne assemblies where the boat is not to be rocked. Secondly, they should make common cause with those members of the Church of England who are already on their way to the same conclusions.

SPIRITUAL HEALTH RATHER THAN EXTINCTION

It would be unrealistic to expect that the new Archbishop will take up office and promptly advocate disestablishment. But it is not unrealistic to hope that within the context of ecumenical discussions and of a changing mood at the grassroots of the Church of England, a new mood of courage will emerge over the lengthy period of his primacy which will lead to change. The challenge is to convince the Church of England that such a step would be a sign of spiritual health and not of imminent extinction.