

The Lasting Heritage of the Oxford Movement

I. What was the Oxford Movement?

- a. 1833 at Oxford University (Church of England); Keble, Pusey, Newman; tracts; tension
- b. B. To U.S. (Hobart's influence) and growth after the Civil War

II. Results

- a. High church/low church tensions
- b. Emphasis on the Sacraments
 - i. Frequent celebrations of Holy Communion
 - ii. Beauty of worship and music stressed
 - iii. Stress on liturgical action and the church year with feasts and fasts
 - iv. Healing and confession
 - v. Cathedrals and churches built
- c. Revival of Spiritual Life
 - i. Monastic communities
 - ii. Prayer life in parishes – missions, quiet days, retreats, etc.
- d. Outreach to needy
 - i. Schools
 - ii. Slums
 - iii. Missions (overseas and domestic)
- e. High view of Church as extension of the Incarnation
 - i. Issues of authority
 - ii. Unity/ecumenical work
 - iii. Traditional and scriptural

Oxford Movement and Its Lasting Influence

I. History

a. Oxford, 1833

John Keble preaches a sermon on national apostasy, denouncing parliament's attempts to abolish ten Irish bishoprics. He is joined in this renewal movement by other Oxford priests and professors, most notably John Newman and Edward Pusey. From 1833 to 1842 this group publishes 90 small pamphlets on issues of the faith ("Tracts for the Times" – sometimes the Oxford Movement is known as the Tractarian Movement.) Newman left the Church of England for Roman Catholicism in 1845. Pusey continued teaching at Oxford and John Keble served for over 30 years as a parish priest.

The movement seemed to end as the publication of the tracts concluded. However, the next generation of clergy, influenced by this theology which reaffirmed the catholicity of the Church of England, and the need for reverent, disciplined Eucharistic worship, went into the cities of Great Britain with a devoted mission to the poor and an emphasis on ceremonial worship. By 1914 candles on the altar, frequent communion, music, and the work of religious communities had reinvigorated the Church.

b. High Church

This term first appeared at the end of the 17th century with the work of Andrewes and Laud. This "school" within Anglicanism can be traced back to the Elizabethan period, especially in the writings of Richard Hooker who resisted the Puritan reformers. High Church referred to continuity with Catholic Christianity, a high concept of the authority of the church over and against secular politics, apostolic succession, and the nature of the sacraments. A return to the theology of the church fathers (3rd and 4th century) was stressed. This strand of the church blossomed in both the catholic and evangelical reforms of the 18th and 19th centuries in both England and the United States.

c. In the U. S.

Samuel Seabury, the first bishop in the United States was himself a high churchman.

Bishop John Hobart of New York was a leader in the church during the early 19th century. He, too, stressed apostolic succession and the importance of the sacraments. The influence of the Oxford movement spread to the United States and was especially welcomed at General Seminary in New York City during the mid and late 19th century. There were many liturgical conflicts within the

Episcopal Church in this country, but by the turn of the century, many “high” churches had been established and in fact the cathedrals of our church reflect the principles of the Oxford reformers. (1862, Grace Cathedral, San Francisco; 1892, the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, New York City; 1907, the National Cathedral, Washington DC.)

II. Lasting influence

- A. Incarnational theology – stressing the divine nature of the church’s ministry and apostolic succession guaranteeing the teaching of the faith. The church has a high calling as the body of Christ. We are united to Christ by baptism and we are to share in his incarnation, death, resurrection and mission. The mission of Christ is to “restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ” and to stand and work as a sign of the in-breaking kingdom of God. The Holy Spirit dwells in the church as the vehicle of grace, empowering the church in its mission in word and sacrament. The bishops and clergy of the church are to act as pastors and teachers of the faith. Pastoral responsibilities and discipline of the clergy is stressed.
- B. The importance of sacramental worship – The Oxford movement restored an emphasis on the sacraments, especially the blessed sacrament of the altar, and reintroduced the frequent celebration of holy communion. In the place of prevailing carelessness and irreverence of the early 19th century churches were repaired and rebuilt and church music, stained glass and other arts were revived. Our worship is to convey a sense of mystery and the beauty of holiness. Worship is to be done with reverence and dignity. The laity are to be included in the celebration of the sacraments. Holy days are to be observed and the teaching of sacramental theology should be a part of our efforts.
- C. Personal prayer and holiness – The relationship between each individual and the Lord is maintained both through corporate prayer and private devotion. Each Christian should take time for this personal relationship with the Lord through prayer, Bible study, retreats and quiet time. Some Christians find a “rule” to be helpful. This private devotion is to balance an active ministry of outreach and services as part of Christ’s body. Both the inner life of prayer and the outer life of mission and outreach are strengthened through corporate worship.
- D. Mission to the world – the Oxford Movement won the hearts of men and women because of the sacrificial nature of the ministry in the slums of England and other countries. The social mandate of the church is inseparable from an incarnation theology of Christ and the church. In our baptismal covenant, we commit ourselves to strive for justice and peace among people and to respect the dignity of every human being. Christians

are called to active engagement with the suffering, the oppressed and those in any need or trouble. We are to serve God's creation, to respect the environment and to use our resources with reverence and in the service of others.

- E. Support for religious communities – within the body of Christ some are called to vows of poverty, obedience, and celibacy. The revival of monasteries and convents within the Anglican communion as a result of the Oxford Movement has greatly strengthened the life of the church. These communities are often centers for retreats and on-going spiritual direction. We are to affirm this special vocation and to find strength for our own pilgrimage by sharing in the ministry of Anglican religious orders.
- F. Concern for the ecumenical movement and efforts toward Christian reunion
- G. Christian Education and the founding of schools, support of seminaries and strengthening of parish programs.

“The Oxford Fathers, in a day not terribly unlike our own, sought to establish one thing above all others: the divine nature of the Church. That is a truth we must lay hold of again. The Church exists, primarily, not to make us good or to improve the world or to uphold the state or even to overthrow it, but to witness to the adorable, objective reality of god and to give god praise. We exist to bear witness to a fact, the most overwhelming of all facts: the glorious reality of God, beside which all our programmes for anything else at all become, in Paul's world, so much refuse. This was the great truth to which the Oxford Apostles pointed. Theirs was a profoundly conservative revolution. They had their own politics and prejudices and they were wrong about a number of worldly things, but those things are forgotten. What endures and still captivates us and fills us with longing is their power of adoration, their reverence, their silence, their fearfulness, their sense of awe before the great and overwhelming fact of God and the Church as the covenanted place of his abiding.”

Richard Holloway, The Bishop of Edinburgh