

## ***An Introduction to Church Bullying. . .***

I am a member of an Anglican church, have been for many years.

Why is this? The worship is turgid, the prayers stilted and artificial, and the preaching second rate. There are many other churches in Singapore that have a culture and practice that I'd feel much more at home with. Yet still I persist.

Why?

The main reason I chose Anglican was that years back I sat down and read the articles of association of the church—the so-called **Thirty-Nine Articles**—and said to myself, *Yes, I can go with this.*

Conversely, I looked at the doctrinal statements of many of those other churches, which tend to be rather rigid and authoritarian, and found things I really couldn't buy into, particularly in relation to concepts like 'verbal inerrancy of scripture'. So I felt I had to go with Anglican, with all its faults and imperfections.

As it happens, I don't particularly agree with some things in the Thirty-Nine Articles. Infant baptism, for example, I'm not keen on at all, and if I had a child I probably wouldn't elect for it. But nonetheless I submit to the doctrine. By which I mean, I would never stand up in an Anglican church and say,

*I thing infant baptism is rubbish!*

If I did, they'd be entirely within their rights, and probably correct in doing so, to say,

*Perhaps Norman if that's how you feel, you might be better off in another church. Why not try Baptist, for example?*

So that's the discipline I impose on myself, to keep my mouth shut on that subject. And it's not a problem to me, at all. I don't feel encroached on or violated by it, because I've made a considered decision of my own free will to live with it, in return for other advantages that I gain.

What I particularly like about the Thirty-Nine Articles is their approach to the bible. The articles were written around 450 years ago, in an age in many ways more enlightened than our own, and they were designed to be inclusive rather than exclusive (OK I know that at the time it was also a considered dig against the church of Rome, that we were breaking away from at the time—that's another story).

Specifically what it says (Article VI) is that

***Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation.***

i.e. all the vital information that you need to be a Christian in there somewhere, and you don't need to go beyond that. Then it goes on to list the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments,

***of whose authority was never any doubt in the Church.***

And that's it. Nothing about inerrancy, historical perfection, dates of creation or any of that; so that's why I'm happy to hear it. A common sense, inclusive approach to the bible. I've thought hugely about this subject over many years (and hopefully planning a book on it at some time), and I really don't want the church pushing me with ill-considered and unproven concepts that stymie my researches.

So where's the bullying?

The bullying comes from the fact that, sadly, the thirty-Nine Articles have been largely forgotten—most Anglicans scarcely even know they exist and certainly don't know what they say. In return we have a sort of free-for-all in which people come up with their own doctrinal positions, find a few allies, preferably in places of political influence within the body, and then start pushing them as conventional mainstream positions and brow-beating anyone who stands against them.

I'm referring here particularly to the young earth creationist movement—meaning anyone who believes the earth came into existence sometime in the last 10,000 years. I don't hold to it myself; but that's not at all the point. The point is that the Thirty-Nine Articles don't specify anything on this point; and therefore no-one should be coming to church and pushing a particular point of view. Even if I did believe it, I like to think that I might have enough integrity to say, since this is not in our Articles, I have no right to push this on other who hold to different views. They're entitled to their views and they shouldn't be bullied by me—just as I shouldn't be bullied by them.

It all comes down—like most things in the Christian life—to that single central tenet of Jesus' teaching,

***'do to other as you would have others do to you.***

I'm not all in favour of restrictive, exclusivist doctrinal statements; but neither am I in favour of anarchy; because anarchy opens the way to bullying. What I love about the Anglican church (in theory) is that we have Articles that are enlightened and inclusive, and should, were they taken a bit more seriously, offer people protection against church bullying.

When I go to McDonalds for a hamburger, the last thing I want is the manager coming out and saying, look I've come up with a new formula that's much better than that boring old Big Mac. Let me give you one. He can't do that. He may be right—he may indeed have a better formula—but if that's what he wants to push he's better off leaving the organization and starting his own franchise under a different name. If McDonalds allowed their managers to introduce their own recipes, it's a sure thing that in 20 years time their business would falling apart and on the road to ruin. That's why the Anglican church now is in such trouble and looks fair set to disintegrate over the next generation or so—we've forgotten the Articles and everyone is preaching their own private beliefs. Anarchy.

I remember a conversation I had with a fairly senior member of our congregation a couple of years ago: *Actually Norman, I believe in evolution; but in church I keep quiet about it, as I'm afraid I may be discriminated against.*

That's bullying!

It's not a recipe for a healthy community to have that kind of bullying going on.

And keeping quiet is not healthy either. It's a selfish attitude. If keep quiet for my own political advantage, then that's leaving the door open for other people, maybe more vulnerable than myself, to be bullied also. That's not love, it's selfishness. And that's why I feel I have to speak out, even though it's certainly not to my political advantage.