***False Teachers - False Teaching***

Having been brought up, trained, and served in the Anglo-Catholic Tradition, whenever I had been questioned about Apostolic Succession, I was more inclined to approach those questions from a tactile position, which resulted in producing Apostolic Succession Charts. Even a passing interest in the Tractarians would cause this subject to arise. Most of my fellow travelers were interested in seeing who laid hands on whom, and some were so concerned about it that they decided to be re-consecrated — sometimes more than once! It is not that I disparage that approach because I think the evaluation of Holy Orders considering matters such as “validity” vs. “invalidity,” and “licit” vs. “illicit” and “regular” vs. “irregular” carries with it an objective and visible line of succession. One may even say as we look at the traditional sacramental evaluation of “form,” “intention,” and “matter,” that our conclusions, while debated by some, can be fruitful.

I was met several years ago with a substantial statement by a Bishop regarding the matter of “being in Communion” or “not being in Communion” from a different perspective. His point, not lost on me, was not the problem of being in Communion or not with a Bishop who conforms to all that I have just stated, but rather from the perspective of whether or not the Bishop is a False Teacher and whether or not he continues to advance the False Teaching.

A very superficial reading of God’s Word gives us a glimpse into what has traditionally been the attitude towards False Teachers and False Teaching. Certainly, the Pastoral Epistles and the Petrine Epistles give us a New Testament glimpse. For Anglicans we have a tendency to latch onto new ways of evaluating heresy or at least heretical teaching by virtue of the communications from Committees and Commissions. For example, when the Primate of Ireland just several decades ago chaired a Commission regarding Holy Orders, we were given the terms: in Communion, impaired Communion, and broken Communion. While logical, in context, they became a part of the new evaluation process. Likewise, although not imbedded in Holy Scripture a few decades later we began to hear many Church matters being mentioned in terms of “First Order” and “Second Order.” As attractive or unattractive as these new forms of assessment may be, in their plainest sense they lack historicity and universality. In fact, they are subjective in nature and it is not uncommon to find a group of well-meaning people disagreeing over where the issue they are proposing falls.

I am noted for saying after years of working on virtually every Liturgical Commission there is, in several Jurisdictions, that Liturgizing eccentricities and idiosyncrasies does not fall into the “Lex orandi - lex credendi” canon of understanding! Revising Church Order is not possible in a local and limited way, nor is it true that the number of people who agree with a Teaching other than what has been revealed (see the Vincentian Canon) can be changed because it meets a local need. The danger, once even well-meaning people begin to promote a dramatic and unprecedented change in one area, is that they must now be armed when others adopt their methodology. The “Gamaliel Principle,” for example, cannot be universally applied, nor (obviously) can the Hegelian Dialectic when we are dealing with matters of Doctrine and Discipline. In the end “synthesis” cannot be accomplished if it alters both a root metaphor and dogmatic truth that has formerly been universally held.

The nature of the ecclesiological deficit that we now experience is that people can easily be mesmerized into thinking that that which is reasonable on a social level must be tenable on a Theological and Biblical level. False Teaching, therefore, is easily adopted due to the fact that it is often reasonable and attractive. The Church has traditionally taught that Bishops are to be Guardians of the Faith, and thus may not alter the doctrine and discipline of what has been held universally by the Church. To minimize the impact of subjective decisions made that reduce what has been an integral part of various tenets of the Faith as “not a Salvation issue” is to ignore the ultimate effect. Theology and the Church are what one might call something akin to an eco-system: we can make a change that is not obviously problematic at the moment or even for a generation or two, but eventually the alteration of that eco system will damage the Body with problems that are unpredictable. It can be as dangerous as contending that two alternate “truths” can coexist. That perspective is actually too foolish to pursue intelligently, since it is a socio-political concept rather than a Theological one.

Therefore, I must thank the Bishop who gave me another way to evaluate Order and Orders. I am indebted to Eastern Orthodoxy for addressing the matter of the validity of Orders when heresy is proclaimed, but I must ask us to evaluate what we teach and what we “guard.” Do I profess something of a theological nature that is innovative? Then I am not Traditional. Do I profess something that is not held universally by the Church — and here I recognize the dilemma in saying “the Church.” Then I am not conservative. Do I take what has not been settled and profess it as my own? Then I may be erring on the side of hubris. In other words, am I furthering unresolved matters as if they were revealed Truth. That is, am I a Defender of Revelation or a Defender of Evolution as it relates to Truth. Again, we must face the fact that once we use new measures of evaluation for one matter, we may find others who find that form attractive enough to apply it to all matters. Given the Bishop’s point regarding “False Teachers” and “False Teaching” perhaps we find ourselves “in Communion” with fewer people than we originally thought!