

Palmer of Bombay – A Forgotten Pioneer?

Edwin James Palmer (1869–1954) was Anglican Bishop of Bombay for twenty years. He played a significant part in the early development of the negotiations that led to the creation of the Church of South India (CSI) in 1947, the first united Church to cross the episcopal-non-episcopal divide. Palmer was, of course, just one of many Anglican, Reformed and Methodist theologians and leaders who contributed to this outcome. Perhaps of more abiding contemporary significance, and eminently worthy of rediscovery and re-reception, was his personal, and, for the time, largely original ecumenical teaching.

Palmer came from a Tractarian background. His father was Archdeacon of Oxford. It was probably from him that Palmer learnt his first concern for unity. In 1872 the Archdeacon preached a sermon: 'What Can We do for Unity?'¹ Palmer, who was also a nephew of the first Lord Selborne, had the type of upbringing typical of eminent Anglican divines of his generation. Scholarships at Winchester and Oxford were followed by a 'Double First' in Greats and a Fellowship at Balliol, then at the height of its reputation. Palmer took orders and was Examining Chaplain to various bishops. In 1909, without previous missionary experience, he was appointed Bishop of Bombay, where he laboured energetically and successfully for twenty years. He then came home and acted as Assistant Bishop of Gloucester, assistant to the redoubtable A. C. Headlam, arguably the ablest Anglican ecumenist bishop and scholar of his era. Palmer's advice was sought by Archbishops of Canterbury and York, and he was used extensively in the negotiations of 1932–4 between the Free Churches and the Church of England.² He continued to write on ecumenical themes well into his old age.

Palmer combined loyalty to the essential principles of 'catholic' Anglicanism that he had learned in his youth with an insight into and appreciation of the Free Churches and their strengths and achievements. The latter was rare amongst Anglo-Catholics of his generation. Had more Anglo-Catholics imbibed the lessons he strove to teach, unity with at least the Methodists and Presbyterians might have come in the 1950s or 60s instead of being stymied partly by Anglo-Catholic intransigence and partly by Free Church suspicions which, in their turn, owed something to their unsympathetic perception of Anglo-Catholicism.

Palmer's concern for unity was reinforced, as was the case with many

*David Carter, a Methodist lay preacher and a member of the English Methodist-Roman Catholic Committee, studies, writes and teaches on ecumenical subjects.

1. Archdeacon E. Palmer, *What Can We Do For Unity?*, 1872, Oxford.
2. These represented an attempt to take a new initiative after the failure of the 1921–25 'Lambeth' Conversations. See G. K. A. Ball, *Christian Unity*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1946, pp. 115–8 for the general context.

others, by his mission-field experience. The mission-field opened him to a key reality to which he testified in 1933, in a riposte to traditionalist Anglo-Catholic critics of his ecumenical stance: 'The acid test of a Church's life is whether it does convert pagans at home and abroad. The non-episcopal Churches have (to our knowledge) done this as much as the episcopal. Is it credible that they could have been enabled by God to do this if he had regarded their communion services as acts of rebellion, imposture, or self-deception, or as empty forms?'³

His ecumenical commitment existed, however, before he set foot in his diocese. In 1908, he gave a paper to the Church Congress on the 'lessons of the Pan-Anglican Congress' which had just occurred.⁴ He sensed, two years before the famous International Missionary Conference which is so often cited as the beginning of the ecumenical movement, a new interest in unity. Even at this time he regarded the matter as urgent, and prophesied that within ten years it would be seen as imperative, a forecast that was accurate even though, in 1908, he could scarcely have foreseen the World War. Through the radical questioning of the cosy assumptions of nineteenth century Christendom which it engendered, the War was to give a fillip to ecumenism. Some of Palmer's later key themes can be traced clearly in this early paper. He was realistic and yet prophetic, a balance that is rarely easy to achieve. He realised that 'a vast deal more mutual knowledge must precede any formal reunion'. He called for study of each others' points of view. He encapsulated much that others were to come to, painfully and far more slowly, in the following paragraph: 'Let us get rid of competition, compromise and uniformity. Let us have not competition but *contribution*, not compromise but *comprehension*, not uniformity but *unity*. Without inward diversity, there is no divine unity'. His attitude was that positive assertions were usually good and negativities likely to be wrong. He illustrated this with regard to affirming the nonconformist view that extempore prayer could be good, while denying the rider still common in most Free Church circles at the time, that liturgical prayer was never good.⁵ It should be emphasised that by 'comprehension' Palmer did not mean doctrinal indifferentism or reductionism (a point that will be illustrated in the next paragraph). He meant rather a generous, rounded catholicity, which, secure in the truths attested in the historic creeds, could gladly accept the validity of contrasting styles of worship, spirituality and theology.

In the quotation cited above, we see Palmer arguing at a very early stage for ecumenical virtues that did not become widely received till much later. Implicit in his statement are such more recent ecumenical themes as 'the

3. Quoted in B. Sundkler, *The Church of South India – The Movement towards Union, 1900–1947*, Lutterworth, 1954, p. 243.
4. E. J. Palmer, *Lessons of the Pan-Anglican Congress*, a paper given to the Church Congress in 1908.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

exchange of gifts' (stressed alike in *Ut Unum Sint* and *Called To Be One*) and the acceptance of not merely the legitimacy but even the necessity of diversity in the apostolic Tradition, understood in the broadest possible sense, i.e. as embracing *typoi* of spirituality and service as well as of doctrinal expression.

Palmer arrived in India to find talk of unity already in the air in some quarters. A group of Churches, primarily of liberal Protestant orientation, many of them based on North American missions, contemplated the formation of a federation for mutual support and cooperation, an idea that echoed much of the talk in the contemporary English Free Churches, where the interest was in federal rather than in fully organic unity. Palmer took an interest in these moves, an interest appreciated by those directly involved, but he made it clear that this was not unity as he believed it was demanded by the gospel. He was critical of the fact that the federation made no plans for a common statement of faith, especially in respect of the divinity of Christ.⁶ Palmer was, and remained subsequently, suspicious of those Liberal Protestants who fought shy of creeds. He believed that they were in danger of falling into a form of Unitarianism. He also believed, not without reason, that they had a completely different concept of the Church to that held in the Great Tradition of the first five centuries. He felt that all they wanted was an association of like-minded admirers of Jesus who could offer each other support in their ideals. They lacked any real sense of being a body of people *incorporated* into Christ.⁷ Palmer wanted a clear ecclesiological understanding, a matter in which again he was well ahead of his time.

However, his insistence on the importance of ecclesiology was balanced by an increasing realisation that the Spirit was active in bodies that had not maintained all the structures of traditional 'catholicism'. He was critical of the rigidity of the traditional high Anglican 'branch' theory of the Church, which regarded only three denominations as being fully within the Body of Christ. He asserted: 'Christ's test for the Church is its fruit and by that test the Free Churches are in the Body'.⁸

Palmer was, thus, no intransigent. From this early stage, he showed a liberal appreciation of the virtues of Protestants in the English Free Church tradition. In 1913 he defended their missionaries against accusations that they wanted to reinforce among their converts the distinction between evangelical and 'catholic'.⁹ In 1914 he wrote a

6. In the Palmer papers in Lambeth Palace Library, there is a pamphlet entitled *The Federation of the Churches – Its Aims and Implications*. It contains annotations by Palmer, some of them trenchantly critical. For Palmer's fears of liberal Protestantism, see especially his *Christ and Catholicity*, Oxford, 1927 (his sixth visitation address), pp. 16ff.

7. E. J. Palmer, *The School of Christ*, a talk given about 1934, contained in the Palmer MSS in Lambeth Palace Library.

8. Sundkler, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

9. Letter, 8 August 1913 (Palmer MSS, Lambeth).

particularly significant letter to a fellow Anglo-Catholic bishop, Charles Gore. Gore, like others of that school, was shocked by the so-called 'Kikuyu Affair' in which the Anglican bishops of Kenya and Uganda had held a Eucharist at which they had given communion to Free Church missionaries. Palmer argued that so far from deserving the name of 'schismatic', most Free Church ministers wanted reunion, even if they were vague about its form. He then made a point about eucharistic hospitality which is still worth considering: 'They (i.e. the non-conformist missionaries) ask for communion from the Lord's Table at which we minister. What would *He* say to them? Do you suppose that all the publicans and harlots whom He admitted to sit with Him at table on earth were advanced penitents and had definitely renounced their evil ways? Did he not welcome some halfway (as the father in the parable)? I want to know, should not you and I be acting like Him in letting some of these good missionary folk who are stumbling after unity come to the table of the one Lord . . . and, on leaving, feel the power of the divine food to complete their aspiration to return to the unity of the Body. . . . I may be quite wrong about this, but I want this point considered by you'.¹⁰

Here we see an early anticipation of the argument, later only slowly accepted in the Church of England, that interim eucharistic sharing can be a spur towards unity. There is also the suggestion that the Eucharist, which commemorates the mighty acts of God in Christ, in so far as it commemorates the extraordinary 'openness' of Christ to sinners, cannot but, on certain occasions at least, burst the bonds of traditional canonical regulation in terms of eucharistic hospitality. The fact that the Eucharist celebrates both the 'openness' of the Lord to all as well as being the sign and seal of unity creates an ecumenical and ecclesiological conundrum which is solved neither by the practice of 'open communion' as usually practiced in the general Free Church tradition, nor by the still very restrictive practices of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches. Palmer no more solved this problem than has anyone else, but he did highlight an aspect of the Eucharist which has often been ignored in the 'catholic' tradition and the need to reconsider canonical rules in its light.

In this, and in many other subsequent ways, Palmer was fearless in examining Scripture and Tradition in order to find ways round ecumenical problems. The sentence with which he ended his point to Gore, 'I may be quite wrong about this, but I want this point considered by you' shows a combination of boldness with personal humility. Later he was to argue that though it was not, in terms of 'catholic' tradition, possible to recognise Free Church ministers without any more ado as 'presbyters', it might be

10. Letter to Gore, 27 March 1914 (Palmer MSS, Lambeth).

possible to recognise them as 'prophets'. He thought this would accord with the earliest tradition as recorded, for example in the *Didache*. It would carry with it an acceptance of their right to preside at the Eucharist.¹¹

Palmer's most important achievement in his relations with the Free Church tradition lay in his appreciation of their positive achievements. He criticised the contemporary general view of 'catholic' Anglicans that any body lacking the episcopal succession could only be considered 'outside' of the Church, however excellent as individual Christians its members might be. He admitted that on a theoretical level: 'The position ought to be true if the Church had been true to the Master's way', but went on to argue: 'The facts are too strong . . . to resist'. The 'facts' he adduced were as follows: 'A great deal of the advance in sacred knowledge, a great deal of the quickening of social conscience and the victories of Christian morality, and a great deal of the conversion of the heathen are due to the activities of groups of Christians who are not within the historic Church or Churches. We have been outstripped in the fruits of righteousness by many of them. We dare not disregard the Spirit's voice, "By their fruits ye shall know them".¹² Palmer's meeting with other Christians on the mission-field made him all the more convinced of these truths. There is also the interesting implication in the first sentence of the quotation that schism on the part of nonconformists may on occasion have been far from unjustifiable, an admission that, if pursued logically, might have made for eirenic, reconciling and healing dialogue with the Free Church tradition.

Palmer was a *critically* loyal Anglican in the best sense. He believed that there was a balance in Anglicanism at its best that was generally lacking in the Roman Catholic and the other Reformation Churches.¹³ He was a believer in diversity and a degree of comprehensiveness because he believed that the Tradition both demanded them and permitted them. He believed that over-rigid definition, which occurred in some Protestant Churches as well as in Rome, inhibited free theological discussion. Insistent as he was, against extreme liberal Protestants, on the value and necessity of creeds, he recognised, as much as any liberal Protestant, that the Church had to be open to new insights and had to be able to allow theologians to propound new ways of understanding the Christian mystery.¹⁴ He was far from blind to the deficiencies of his own Communion. He recognised and reprobated the tendency in one school of Anglicanism to be blind to the faults of Rome, while severely and often ignorantly critical of the Protestant and Free Churches. By the same token,

11. Sundkler, *op.cit.*, p. 118. *The Church Union Gazette*, November 1932, contained a spirited riposte to Palmer's suggestion by Dom Gregory Dix, under the title 'Bishop Edwin Palmer on Lay Celebration'.

12. E. J. Palmer, *The Great Church Awakes*, 1920, pp. 31-2.

13. See for example his pamphlet on the vocation of Anglicanism.

14. Letter, 8 November 1910 (Palmer MSS, Lambeth).

he felt the opposite school was tender to Protestants while unreasonably antagonistic to Rome.¹⁵

Above all, Palmer claimed that the prime loyalty of Anglicans should not be to the heritage of the Church of England as such, but to the fullness of catholicity. He was insistent that the Anglican Church was in India not to replicate the Church of England as a denomination in a strange land, but to offer Indians catholic Christianity.¹⁶ He was also emphatic that reunion between Anglicans and other Christians must never mean absorption by Anglicanism. In his *The Great Church Awakes*, published in 1920 at the same time as the *Lambeth Appeal*, he stressed the importance of what he called 'the Great Church' mentality against that of the 'little Church'. By the former, he meant a mentality that cheerfully accepted diverse patterns of devotion and theological emphasis within the one body held together structurally by the commonly accepted ministry and creeds. 'We can have fruitful fellowship, even if we are being taught different aspects of the truth', averred Palmer. He was prepared to accept differences, provided they did not result in direct contradiction over fundamental aspects of faith. He expected Christians to grow into the maturity of being able to contain their differences within the one Body. Unity must always be more important than our opinions.¹⁷

His teaching is summed up in these two statements: 'Let us conceive of Reunion as the awakening of the Great Church, the Universal Church, the Body of Christ, to a consciousness of itself and to an experience of the power of life that God has placed in it'.¹⁸ 'We must look at ourselves and the Churches to which we belong as we really are in the Universal Church'. One might almost see these as anticipations of the Tillardian emphasis on 'conversion to the apostolic Tradition'. There is a breadth of prophetic vision in the New Testament understanding of the Church Universal to which all Churches need constantly to return in order to see what they are being called both to receive and to give in the pursuit of wider catholicity.

Palmer was convinced that within the fragmented Church *as a whole* the fullness of truth could certainly be found, but that no one empirically existing separated Church could contain the fullness of truth. Churches in separation distorted the truth to greater or lesser degree. He illustrated this in a series of remarks on the place of sacramental confession. He argued that the primary 'germ' teaching of Scripture was that confession of sin was always good and profitable. It was legalism to make sacramental confession compulsory, but it was also legalism to argue, as some Protestants did, that it was wrong in principle.¹⁹ Clearly Palmer believed

15. E. J. Palmer, *Christ and Catholicity*, pp. 15-16.

16. *The Unity of the Church*, a memo by Palmer, 7 February 1918 (Palmer MSS, Lambeth).

17. *Ibid.*

18. *The Great Church Awakes*, p. 23.

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 48-9.

that balanced and comprehensive Christian teaching and practice could only be restored in the restored *koinonia* of the entire Church; hence his call for a vision of the Great Church which would leave all Christians to realise the essential incompleteness of their present denominations and the need to strive for their transcendence and completion in a greater whole. 'We must not cling', he said in 1937, 'to views and customs that come from the exaggerations of reaction.'²⁰

Palmer had no illusions about the demands of the search for unity. 'The change will bring us discomfort. . . . We shall have to change our mind. We shall have to admit that we and our fathers have been wrong. . . . We must neither be unwilling nor afraid to reconsider what we have taught or thought all our lives. We must not be scandalised if we are asked to give reasons for any practice, however ancient. . . . We like our fellow Christians so little. But *He loves them*. He upholds them. He reforms them. He inspires them. They glorify Him. They preach Him. They draw men to Him'.²¹ Perhaps nowhere has the need for overall ecumenical repentance been quite so succinctly stated as in these few short sentences. Palmer was a realist about the differing situations he encountered. He always realised that unity would come more easily in India. The sheer pressure of an overwhelmingly non-Christian environment naturally drove Christians together. Indian Christians had no inherited denominational antagonisms to cope with, nor indeed, in general, did denominational differences make any sense to them.²² England was different. In 1933, Palmer wrote to the veteran Methodist scholar, Lofthouse, 'If we want the reunion of Christendom, we must expect the reconciliation of opinion and the attainment of agreement to take place in our children and grandchildren's time, and to take place largely because, unlike us, they will be brought up, they will live and they will work in one body'.²³

The clear implication of the last few words is that Palmer hoped the Churches would achieve organic unity and then grow into a richer unity within that context. Palmer did not lack prophetic courage. On his return to England, he found the South India scheme under frequent attack, particularly from Anglo-Catholics who regarded it as a 'betrayal' of 'catholic principles'. Palmer was determined to see the scheme as pioneering reconciliation across the most damaging Christian division of all, that between 'Catholics', in the broadest sense, and Protestants. He had no illusion as to the risks which were being taken before and after union, but he regarded them as justified by the missionary imperative. He wrote to the *Times*: 'Your readers should also consider the scheme in its widest

20. E. J. Palmer, *The Cost of Reunion*, 1937; an occasional paper of the Friends of Reunion.

21. *Ibid.*, pp. 11–12, 13, 15.

22. E. J. Palmer, *The Challenge of an Indian Experience*, Oxford, 1933, p. 193.

23. Letter to John Scott Lidgett, 28 February 1933 (Palmer MSS, Lambeth).

bearings. The division between Catholic and Protestant is the most potent reason why the Church has so little influence today and is not bringing the modern world to Christ, who alone can save it. Some obscure persons in South India are making the first attempt to end that division. They are like men asking leave to go over the top. They know that they may die in the attempt and that their attempt will fail if they are not followed. In other words, it is possible that the United Church will go wrong after union. It is also possible that the Churches of other lands will not follow their example and join themselves into one Church. Our fellow-Christians in South India are willing to take both these risks. Who says to them, "Stop"? Who says to them, "Go"? Who is it who dies, deserted by all, to save all? Who is it who wants one body with which to complete his saving work?'²⁴

Palmer's hopes for the Church of South India were largely fulfilled. The Church, uniting four Anglican dioceses, the Methodist Church in Southern India and the South India United Church (itself a previous union of Congregationalists and Presbyterians) was inaugurated in 1947. Marcus Ward's and other accounts written in the 50s show how rapidly the new Church settled down, and its members really came to live in each others' traditions, with many ex-Free Churchmen in particular coming to a real appreciation of the benefits of episcopal leadership.²⁵ However, the CSI failed to broaden its base and bring Lutherans in. Its example was followed in the rest of the Indian sub-continent in 1971 with the creation of the united Churches of North India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, but not beyond it. Elsewhere many abortive attempts to unite Anglicans with various Free Churches all failed. These are sobering thoughts for the fiftieth anniversary of the CSI.

Palmer's wider hopes, then, were largely disappointed. He always accepted that reunion in England would be a much tougher prospect. In the last resort he failed to persuade the very considerable body of militant Anglo-Catholic opinion of the rightness of his approach. He also failed to convince Free Churchmen, as can be seen from his correspondence with W. F. Lofthouse, though it can be argued that Palmer's failure owed something to Lofthouse's failure to integrate Palmer's insights into those of his Wesleyan predecessors.²⁶

Palmer's ecclesiology contained a strongly pragmatic and pneumatic element that should have appealed to the Wesleyan mind. He argued that Christ had laid down no real rules for the Church, but had left it to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This was a position very close to that of the classical Wesleyan ecclesiologists, such as Benjamin Gregory.²⁷ Palmer

24. *The Times*, 5 January 1933.

25. A. M. Ward, *The Pilgrim Church*, Epworth, 1953, especially chapter 10, pp. 173ff.

26. Letter to Lofthouse, 28 February 1933 (Palmer MSS, Lambeth).

27. B. Gregory, *The Holy Catholic Church*, London, 1873, pp. 32ff. for the typical Wesleyan understanding of this.

also believed that episcopacy emerged to meet a practical need, a point that John Scott Lidgett accepted.²⁸ Where Palmer and the Wesleyans disagreed was on the future 'changeability' of Church structures after the formative period of the first few centuries. Palmer, in common with other 'catholics', regarded them as unalterable, whereas Free Churchmen in general believed they were alterable, at least in the case of missionary exigencies.²⁹

Palmer believed that all major Catholic principles could be shown to be derived from words or actions of our Lord or the apostles, even though they provided only the 'germ' of the later principle or practice. This of course presupposed a theory of development that the Free Churchmen did not find easy to accept, and Palmer pleaded in vain with Lofthouse to see the point. One feels that if he had been able to initiate a debate with Lofthouse and others on the ways in which both Connexionalism and episcopacy, albeit at differing points, had developed from early apostolic practice as means of ensuring real *koinonia*, then fruitful dialogue would have emerged.³⁰ Had Palmer also pointed to the role of the episcopate in expressing *koinonia* with previous generations of Christian communities, and not just their leaders, he might have touched upon a weak point in Wesleyan ecclesiology that Lofthouse and others would have had to concede needed attention. Had he then gone on to emphasise the role of the apostolate in 'recognising and connecting' communities in the Church, a valuable synthesis with a key aspect of Methodist ecclesiology could have been effected.³¹

Palmer, however, for all his considerable insights into Free Church feelings – he understood, for example the reluctance of Free Church ministers in India to consider 'conditional' ordination lest it seemed a betrayal of their previous ministry – could not do this. He understood and affirmed the Free Church concern that episcopacy should be exercised in rather than over the Church, and with the cooperation of the presbyterate and lay leaders.³² However, he did not fully understand the Free Church emphasis on 'synodality' at every level. He was clearly puzzled by the emphasis on collective leadership and decision-making at every level within Methodism. He thought it a relic from Methodism's societary days.³³ Historically this was often the case, but theologically it was the embodiment of a principle that he failed fully to appreciate.

28. J. S. Lidgett, a letter to *The Times*, 14 January 1933.

29. *Ibid.* for a very nuanced view of this question on Free Church reservations as to episcopacy in practice.

30. For Palmer's view, see his letter to Lidgett, 28 February 1933. Lofthouse, like many Free Churchmen, emphasised what he saw as the past failures of episcopacy. See for example his letters to Palmer of 18 February and 13 March 1933 (Palmer MSS, Lambeth).

31. Gregory, *op.cit.*, pp. 41–54.

32. In fact he insisted on this: 'to genuine episcopacy, the bishop and his council are necessary', Sundkler, *op.cit.*, p. 119.

33. Palmer in a letter to Temple, 5 March 1933.

Palmer was a great pioneer. Much of what he stood for is now widely accepted by ecumenists, though some of it has still fully to be received and acted on in practical terms. His insistence that the Tradition can easily become unbalanced and distorted in separated Churches bears rethinking today in all our Churches. Palmer's emphasis on 'life in the Body meaning death to self' deeply influenced ecumenists of the next generation such as Leslie Newbigin. It is a point that could well be re-received at every level both within the Churches and between them. The very fact that it was necessary to call Vatican II, and through it begin to 'receive' many positive insights from Orthodoxy and Protestantism, shows the importance of this lesson not just for Roman Catholics but for all of us. In a sense, all Churches feel that they have maintained the 'essentials', but it is easy for them to become overlaid. The constant repentance and rethinking for which Palmer called link him both with the Protestant principle of '*ecclesia semper reformanda*' and the call of the Pope in *Ut Unum Sint* for repentance.

DAVID CARTER

Surrey, England

Jesus told a story about