

REPORT ON A MEETING WITH Revd. ALAN E. MATHERS, VICAR OF CHRISTCHURCH, SUTTON, 8 May 1992

Following the exhibition by 15 churches in the Europa Gallery, I received a letter from Rev. Alan Mathers in which he said that he wished to meet the person responsible for the Quaker exhibit 'to discuss its theological content'. I arranged to meet him at the vicarage and gave him a copy of our poster. We had a very lively, even heated, discussion that lasted an hour and a half.

Alan Mathers' view is that he was offended by our panel headed 'Absence of Dogma'. He claimed that all the other churches who exhibited were united in accepting the creed as the basis of their unity; we were the odd-ones-out and our poster therefore detracted from the Christian Message.

The text of the panel was:

Written creeds we feel are unhelpful. A creed seeks to fix the faith at one point in time, and in our view it tends to inhibit the spiritual growth of the community. It is a mistake to imagine that the pure kernel of Christianity can be precisely defined in words.

Willim Penn (1762): 'It is not opinion, or notions of what is true, or assent to articles or propositions, though never so soundly worded, that makes a man a true believer or a true Christian. But it is conformity of mind and practice to the will of God'.

For Alan Mathers the basis of Christianity is the Bible. He accepts scientific thought and Biblical studies, so long as they do not question the validity of the Gospel records. He feels that any approach that begins to question whether the words of Jesus are authentic leads us into a position where the authority of the scriptures is lost, and then so are we.

I of course raised with him the fact that not all Anglicans shared these views. He responded vehemently that he was not concerned with *individual* attitudes, only with the expressed position of the church as a whole. He repeatedly stressed that what had to be shown in the Europa exhibition were the official views of the churches and that the fact that not all Anglicans think alike was irrelevant.

I indicated that we have a lot in common with the Liberal wing of the Church of England. He rejects us all as being outside the pale of true Christianity. 'If you let go of the fundamental truth of the Gospels, you don't know what to believe; religion becomes a matter of your own (arrogant) choice, rather than God's word'.

I tried to argue:

1. that spiritual truth cannot easily be contained in words (he agreed) and that more important than agreement in words is a sense of spiritual unity (he felt this to be meaningless without agreement on basic belief).
2. that Meeting for Worship is a valid form of Christian worship, in which we gain deep and valuable spiritual insights (he rubbished this view, saying that if we do not agree on basic belief, then our unity is imaginary).

3. Quakerism sees itself as part of the wider Christian church and we have been welcomed by others, both in Sutton and nationally.

Allan Mathers was very outspoken in his rejection of anything that questioned the Evangelical position. He used terms like 'this is rubbish', 'you are confused', 'you are saying that Jesus lied', 'you have no moral absolutes, therefore you agree with mugging and stealing'.

The most worrying aspect of what he said to me was that he intends to take this matter up with Churches Together in Sutton & Cheam. He feels that it is quite wrong that we are accepted into this organisation and he expressed his intention to write to the chairman. I formed the view that Alan Mathers is extremely dogmatic, violently opposed to liberal Christianity, and to Quakers in particular, and that he presents a considerable danger to our continued membership of Churches Together. Before I met him I regarded my visit as perhaps preliminary to a more formal discussion, but I frankly hold out no hope for any further meetings with him.

G. Gordon Steel

From the minutes of Sutton Preparative Meeting, May 1992:

"At a subsequent meeting of Churches Together, 'the matter was fully explored and there was little support for Rev. Mathers' proposal'. We received letters of support from three local clergymen. One said: 'You will have heard that our feelings were clear – we want you in our midst, we accept your different view of the place of credal statements And we felt that you entirely fitted into our second condition of membership'."