

Sydney Anglicanism: An Apology

Michael P Jensen

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A book explaining and defending the Anglican Diocese of Sydney, written by a true blue Sydney evangelical Anglican, is well overdue after a number of books written by critics who have majored on what they think are the more negative aspects of the diocese. Few could be better placed to do this than Michael Jensen. He has lived most of his life in the diocese. He is the son of the recently retired Archbishop of Sydney, a former lecturer at Moore Theological College, the flagship of the diocese, and a scholar, holding a doctorate from Oxford University.

Before outlining the contents of the book I need to say that it will be a somewhat perplexing read for most Catholics and most Anglicans, even evangelical ones, outside of Sydney. It is about the idiosyncrasies of and tensions within Sydney Anglicanism. It is an insider's book that is addressed to fellow Sydney Anglicans who are in the know.

In his book Jensen attempts three things. First, he seeks to defend Sydney Anglicans on a number of matters without any reservations. We are not fundamentalists, just Bible-believing Christians; our distinctive form of Biblical Theology is to be commended not criticised because it gives "theological coherence" to the whole Bible, and our expository sermons are a model others should follow because they acutely convey the mind of God. Second, he defends Sydney Anglicans but with some reservations. Dr Broughton Knox, the Principal of Moore College from 1959 to 1985, was right to speak of the Bible as "propositional revelation only" but he "overstated his case". The prevailing congregational doctrine of the church is basically correct but it needs some adjustment. Sydney has been right in insisting on the priority of evangelism and thus leaving to one side social concern, but in today's world more focus on the social dimension of the Gospel is demanded. The Sydney hierarchical doctrine of the Trinity is orthodoxy but it was a bad "tactical mistake" to speak of "the eternal subordination of the Son" (133), something orthodoxy proscribes. The winner-take-all approach to church politics in Sydney, is "remarkably good" (160) at achieving what those who hold the power want, but some courteousness and charity is desirable. Third, he calls for change. He is critical of the Sydney's minimising of the Anglican identity of the diocese and he argues that the push for lay presidency of the Eucharist must be abandoned "as a matter of tactics" (158) if Sydney does not want to lose the opportunity it now has "for leadership within national and global Anglicanism" (145).

His chapter on the ordination of women is so convoluted it is impossible to categorise. It is nevertheless one that demands careful attention because he tells us that "if there is any single issue with which Sydney Anglicans have found themselves identified, it is surely the matter of the ordination of women to the priesthood." And he adds, this matter is the "line in the sand" (126) over which Sydney evangelicals can never cross. It cannot be crossed because this issue distinguishes Christians who stand under the authority of scripture

from those who do not (127). It is not a debate over the *interpretation* of scripture, but a debate over the *authority of Scripture*. Because he himself stands under the authority of Scripture he says he endorses “the principles of headship [of men] and submission [of women] in church order” (130). This he finds clearly taught in the “decisive” text (128), 1 Tim 2:11-15, that reveals the unchanging mind of God. This text settles everything. It teaches that God has permanently excluded women from teaching/preaching in the church, putting man in authority over the woman on the basis of the creation-given ordering of the sexes that can never change. In Genesis chapter 2 woman is created second and thus she is second in rank; she sinned first indicating she needs male leadership, and she was created as man’s subordinate “helper”. The fact that this androcentric *interpretation* of Genesis chapter 2 has virtually no contemporary scholarly support and would contradict what is plainly stated in Gen 1:27-28 (men and women are alike made in the image of God and alike given dominion over creation) is not noted by Jensen or other Sydney Anglican theologians.

However, much to the readers surprise in this chapter on women Michael Jensen also denies explicitly that Sydney evangelicals hold to a “hierarchical view of humanity”, and that male “headship”/leadership in the home can be “transposed into the church” (129). He boldly affirms that “Paul did expect women to speak in the church gathering in some capacity” (143) and then he mentions women prophesying, the gift Paul sets above teaching in 1 Cor 12:28. Furthermore, he says that Sydney theologians insist on “the profound equality of all human beings in God’s eyes” and that they believe that Scripture speaks “of the profound and ineradicable sameness and mutuality of the human male and female” (138). They do not endorse an “essentialist” view of the sexes (139). They believe that, “like political order, gender is a very human, culturally interpreted, and negotiated realization of the created nature of our sexed bodies” (139). And to crown it all, he says that among the many Sydney evangelical marriages, “I know [their] marriages are remarkably egalitarian” (140). This he implies is highly commendable. In saying these things Michael Jensen boldly crosses “the line in the sand”, completely undermining Sydney’s case for the permanent subordination of women and thus exclusion from church leadership.

The evaluation of this book is not easy. One could dismiss it as a convoluted attempt to defend what is indefensible or as an exciting window into the evolving thinking of a younger generation of evangelicals in the Anglican diocese of Sydney that spells change is in the air. I see it as a mixture of both and in particular as a disclosure of the thinking of one well-informed young Sydney evangelical theologian who is on a journey where the destination is yet to be decided on by the traveller.

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