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Salvation through Christ Alone? — A Moment of Decision

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The Church of England faces yet another theological challenge as it prepares for the meeting of its General Synod in July. This time the issue is the Gospel itself and the specific question concerns the evangelization of Muslims. In the end, the outcome of this debate may, more than anything else, determine the future viability of the Church of England.

Paul Eddy, a lay theology student from Winchester who aspires to the priesthood, has entered a Private Member's Motion and has secured the signatures necessary to force the General Synod to deal with his motion.

The text of his motion sets the issue clearly:

'That this Synod request the House of Bishops to report to the Synod on their understanding of the uniqueness of Christ in Britain's multi-faith society, and offer examples and commendations of good practice in sharing the gospel of salvation through Christ alone with people of other faiths and of none.'

Mr. Eddy's motion has been roundly denounced by many in the church and the Daily Mail [London] reports that liberal bishops attempted to dissuade members from signing the motion. Nevertheless, the motion is now set and the General Synod will effectively vote on whether the Church of England should seek to evangelize Muslims.

As the Daily Mail reports:

[Mr. Eddy] said that the active recruitment of non-believers and adherents of other faiths had always been a Biblical injunction on Christians, commanded by Christ himself.

But he claimed that many bishops were downplaying the missionary role of the Church and official documents often glossed over the requirement to convert Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs or followers of other religions.

He warned that the central role of Christianity in Britain was being eroded, and by 'allowing the rise of another religion in our country, all that Britain stands for is up for grabs.'

Mr. Eddy's motion has found support among at least some bishops, including the Bishop of Rochester, Michael Nazir-Ali. Bishop Nazir-Ali, born in Pakistan, is the only Asian-born bishop in the Church of England. In response to Mr. Eddy's motion, the Bishop argued that the Church of England has failed in its responsibility to "welcome people of other faiths." He suggested that the church had "gone too far" in responding to the sensitivities of British Muslims.

He also said, "Our nation is rooted in the Christian faith and that is the basis of welcoming people of other faiths. You cannot have an honest conversation on the basis of fudge."

Just months ago, the bishop drew criticism for his warning that certain sectors of British cities had become "no-go areas" where Muslims intimidate others from entering. The Telegraph [London] reported that Bishop Nazir-Ali's statements met with fierce opposition from another bishop:

However, his comments were condemned by senior figures within the Church. The Rt Rev Stephen Lowe, the former Bishop of Hulme and the newly appointed Bishop of Urban Life and Faith, said: "Both the Bishop of Rochester's reported comments and the synod private members' motion show no sensitivity to the need for good inter-faith relations. Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs are learning to respect one another's paths to God and to live in harmony. This demand for the evangelisation of people of other faiths contributes nothing to our communities."

Bishop Lowe sets the issue clearly. He denies that the church should share the Gospel with persons of other faiths, but should instead "respect one another's paths to God."

This is precisely the theological compromise that motivated Paul Eddy to bring his motion in the first place. Mr. Eddy told the BBC that the Church of England has "lost its nerve" and was "not doing what the Bible says" in terms of evangelism.

His motion explicitly affirms "the uniqueness of Christ" and "the gospel of salvation through Christ alone," and for this reason the church will be forced to face a defining issue for the integrity of the Gospel and the church.

If Bishop Lowe's theology wins the day, as evidence suggests is already happening, the Church of England will forfeit any claim to the Gospel. The New Testament leaves absolutely no room for other "paths to God," nor for allowing "respect" to preclude evangelism.

The Church of England is not the only church or denomination that has "lost its nerve" when it comes to the Gospel, nor is it the only church to face this test, but it will set its future course in July even if the vote on Mr. Eddy's motion is the only vote taken.

