

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](https://paypal.me/robbradshaw)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_bq\\_01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php)

## Church Union by Federation.

**M**OST Christians feel to-day the need for more intimate fellowship, not only of persons, but of churches. Some are impressed with their geographical limitations and desire a better understanding with groups on the Continent; others are grieved at local overlapping, and wish for a better knowledge of those in their own village. All feel that they do not attain what was the purpose of their Founder, "that they may be one, even as We," the Father and the Son.

There has been much earnest exploration from many angles. But generally there has been one tacit assumption, that unity involves one corporation organised on lines quite familiar in English politics, with one code of laws, one governing body; when carried to its logical issue, with one visible supreme ruler. The text quoted above supplies no warrant for this: unity is desired, but a unity by no means mechanical, a unity of spirit, life, purpose. This may be expressed in many methods of organisation. It is proposed to indicate another of such methods, familiar enough in political and economic life, but not seriously explored for ecclesiastical organisation; the plan of Federation.

Such an examination is not purely academic. In 1926 the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland, which had been carefully considering overtures made six years earlier from Lambeth, returned the reply that it would not unite on the basis proposed, but that it was ready to join in exploring the possibility of a Federal Union. And in 1930, at a meeting of the Continuation Committee of the Conference on Faith and Order, Professor Adolf Deissmann spoke at length on somewhat similar lines. When the British section of a great communion thrice the size of the Anglican, and a great Continental leader, independently look in the same direction, that deserves practical attention.

Federation is a method well tried in political affairs, with a history of two and a half millenniums. Switzerland, America, Australia, work on this line; India and the Commonwealth of British Nations are exploring. Let us make sure of its salient points.

A Federal State is composed of several groups; each of which has a large measure of internal self-government; each of which recognises the validity of the methods of its sisters, though possibly different from its own; all of which have agreed to unite for certain mutual purposes internally, and for all purposes externally.

To illustrate from the Dominion of Canada. The Province of Quebec regulates property and civil rights and all municipal affairs; neither the province of New Brunswick nor the Dominion as a whole intervenes in these matters; though Quebec may be very different from its sister provinces in its laws, their validity is recognised on all hands. A company may be incorporated under the laws of Ontario, and work wholly within its borders, on lines quite independent of those adopted in Alberta, where a company with the same general objects may be organised on a very different pattern; each company is quite legal, and is recognised in all provincial and Dominion courts. Nova Scotia has seven sorts of judicial courts, much resembling English; while Manitoba is content with a King's Bench, county courts, police magistrates: there is no attempt at a standardised pattern. But matters of criminal law, customs duties, passports and all external relations, are dealt with by the Dominion as a whole.

Here then is a style of union very congenial to people of our blood, working as between people of differing races in Switzerland, tested in different places, approving itself for nearly 150 years, and being regarded with increasing attraction in political circles. Can it be adopted for ecclesiastical purposes?

Something approaching it has a promising record. The Orthodox Churches of the East have long associated on lines of this kind; considering how they were originally Greek, and how Greeks had had federal union of cities long before the Christian era, this is most natural. Each patriarch with his synod has oversight of one group; by subdivision or by transplantation, new groups have been formed, notably in Russia and in Greece. For many purposes each manages its own affairs; for a few great purposes each is loath to act independently, but at least takes counsel with its sisters.

In the Anglican Communion a similar evolution is taking place. The province of Canterbury is independent of the province of York; the historic organisation has been different, the rules have been different, yet each respected the method of the other. Other provinces have been organised, without any complications due to action of any State. Each province behaves independently in a great many matters, yet respects the differing practice of other provinces. Consultative conferences are held frequently, and there is a general disposition to accept the advices given at Lambeth throughout the whole Communion.

Both in America and in England there have been formed Federal Councils of Evangelical Free Churches. In England the Baptists, Congregationalists, Methodists, Presbyterians and three smaller bodies have found a common basis in their beliefs,

their views on the ministry, their purpose of evangelisation; they have therefore instituted a Council to which their supreme authorities appoint members. Among its objects are, to co-ordinate the activities and resources of the Evangelical Free Churches, so as most effectively to promote the evangelisation of the people, and to enter into united action with other branches of the Church of Christ throughout the world.

In this last instance the federating bodies exist and work in the same area, which is not the case with the Orthodox or the Anglicans. This feature deserves closer attention, and we may recognise similar cases in economic life, Trades Unions, Caste.

A single town will see branches of various trades unions, carpenters, bricklayers, railwaymen. Each branch manages its own internal affairs, without referring to the branch of another union in the same town; and each branch respects the decisions of another. But the unions have their own Congress and their machinery for concerted decision and action; they may see differently on great questions, but they have agreed to consult and adopt a common policy; they are federated, and find no difficulty in their geographical overlapping, while they have differences of function. The same system is well known in India, where indeed the caste or trades union is hereditary.

Hence it seems that in ecclesiastical matters, there need be no insuperable bar to a federation of churches all at work in the same area. And indeed the Mediaeval Church and the modern Roman Catholic Church will afford instances how such a system has worked. In one English county, there were scores of parish priests under the supervision of the diocesan bishop; each had a jurisdiction over a limited area and none outside it, each recognised the acts of his brethren and his Father in Christ. But they collectively represented only one system, the Diocesan; and in the same county, there were many other organisations. There were Benedictine monks under abbots, each absolutely independent of any one save the Pope. There were Cluniac monks with priors, dependent to some extent on a foreign abbey. There were Premonstratensian canons, similarly dependent on a foreign abbey. There were Cistercian monks, governed by an oligarchic convention. There were four orders of Friars, each self-governing, with headquarters abroad. There were preceptories where knights were trained to go and defend the Temple at Jerusalem; there were commanderies where Hospitallers were trained for Jerusalem or Acre or Rhodes; and the English recruiting establishments rendered often some local service. The Middle Ages did not see one plain Diocesan system where within one area there was uniform government and method; monks, friars and other orders rejoiced in their variety and their

immunity from the local bishops. Attempts were made for some co-ordination, and the solution was not local. Each Order organised itself more completely, and the governing bodies at headquarters were the links, when links were devised. But a single county would see parish priests distributed so as to cover the whole area, Benedictines specialising in study, Cistercians in sheep-breeding, Dominicans in preaching, Franciscans in Salvation Army work. There was an immense ground common to all, yet a different flavour in each; and with certain jealousies, yet each acknowledged the other groups. Hence we may hope that a Federal union of churches to-day, working over the same area, is capable of being devised, and of working. Can we imagine some of the lines it would take?

First, there must be an agreement on some things as fundamental. There have been enquiries on matters of Faith, and of Order; far too much attention has been paid to points of difference, with a hasty assent to many points of agreement. The great preponderance of these latter has not received general recognition. In the course of centuries, there has been careful examination of many points of theology, and results have been summed up by Thomas Aquinas, the Westminster Assembly and others, at very great length. These, however, are not unanimously accepted, and for half a century there has been a tendency to say that much is not fundamental, and to go back to the Nicene and the Apostles' creeds. "Back to Christ" is a more recent motto well known; and its implications in this connection are obvious: His crucial test was whether a man was with Him, not even with the apostles. He regarded as fundamental the recognition of Himself as the Christ, the Son of the living God. That statement included a Jewish term, of which the Gentile version was, Jesus is Lord. Such recognition of supremacy involves the acceptance of commands; the first gospel leads up to its climax in a brief command, based expressly on the fulness of authority in Jesus: Win Me disciples, pledge them in baptism, teach them My ways. In matters of Faith and Obedience, is there any need to go further?

In matters of Order, is there any need of uniformity? The early churches did not think so; some were governed by Elders, one by Bishops and Deacons; scholars recognise great variety for 150 years. The Middle Ages did not think so; the East was content with a hierarchy up to Patriarchs, the West admitted a Pope, but enriched the system with Austin Canons, Austin Friars, Carthusians, &c. In the political world, uniformity is not stipulated for: there are limited monarchies, republics on different patterns, Fascist and Socialist states, all recognising one another and joining in a League of Nations. Why should there

not be, within England for example, a frank recognition that Anglicans, Baptists, Methodists, &c. are free to organise on any pattern they find congenial and useful, and will recognise one another as inter-dependent groups? If Anglicans are content to leave the last word to Parliament, that is their affair, and other communions should not interfere in their internal concerns. If Presbyterians choose to district out the land on their lines, and govern by a Synod, again that is their affair. If Congregationalists begin to arrange provinces and appoint moderators, what business is it of the Moravians?

The internal matters of each federating body would naturally include not only questions of government, but of membership, of worship, perhaps of property. Fortunately in the most important of these, membership, there is substantial agreement. Each body seems to stipulate that for all practical purposes, a man becomes a member by his own choice. The Electoral Rolls of the Church of England are not made up automatically as by a revising barrister, but by a man desiring his name to be placed thereon. At the other extreme, the roll of a Baptist Church is augmented on the request of the person, and is purged after the reluctant recognition that he is no longer fulfilling his duties. Whatever be the ceremony of admission, the conditions of membership are in essence the same—an avowal of loyalty to Jesus Christ.

In worship there is not much uniformity anywhere, and most bodies do not even pretend to aim at it. There is no reason why any one body should be concerned with the practices found useful to others. So, too, with property. Whether a society lives by weekly or annual contributions, by endowments, by help from a pool, has little or nothing to do with religion; no one society need interfere with another as to its revenue. Perhaps, however, buildings might be pooled, and perhaps endowments, and probably new revenue can be raised.

The greatest difficulty has been felt over the officers; but this will disappear if it be agreed that each federating body may have what officers it likes, and may change its methods as it finds need. Canada has its lieutenant-governors appointed by the Governor-general, Australia by the King, the United States has one plan on paper, another in practice. A governor of Tennessee has no powers outside his own state, but is recognised and honoured as a governor wherever he travels in the United States. If then Baptists certify that a man is of good standing as a minister, then where he exercises his ministry, and in what exact capacity, is a matter of Baptist concern only; but it will be expected that other bodies will recognise him as a Baptist minister, which does not involve granting him any standing in a Methodist Church. If Anglicans consecrate a man bishop, it is a

purely Anglican affair whether he be diocesan, suffragan, assistant, and what his duties are; other churches will recognise him as an Anglican bishop, but he will have no jurisdiction in any of their congregations or assemblies. When Presbyterians ordain a man, they will have their own rite, their own men to ordain; Congregationalist and Anglican ministers will be welcome to witness, and may be treated as honoured guests, but as guests and spectators alone.

What, then, is the gain of federation? First, frank mutual recognition. And secondly, the wise utilisation of all Christian forces for evangelisation, instead of haphazard or historical or competitive distribution. These two points deserve expansion.

There is still an aloofness in many parts between different bodies of Christians; "church" and "chapel" may not be on speaking terms; and the most polite of clergymen may often have the inward conviction that he possesses spiritual powers not owned by the Wesleyan preacher. No hostility is found as a rule between the customers of Barclay's and of Lloyd's banks; a director of the G.W.R. can meet one of the L.M.S. without condescension on either side. If, however, a girl to-day finds that an Anglican rector dislikes meeting a Congregationalist minister even on a Bible Society platform, that a fine old Methodist is repelled from the Breaking of Bread by the Brethren, what will she think of the Christianity which all alike profess? Federation implies the full recognition of every member of every federating body as a member of the Universal Church of Christ, so that he is welcome at every act of worship in every section; but not that he has rights of government outside his own. It implies the full recognition of every minister as a minister, with jurisdiction within his own body as that body recognises. It is not for the Presbyterian to feel that a man ordained without laying on of hands is lacking something important; nor for the Baptist to feel that a man merely christened in infancy has never even been baptised; in each case the man stands or falls to his Master, and the judgment of his own body upholds his own convictions. Full mutual recognition is a first condition, and a first gain.

The second gain is of efficiency. The supply of candidates for the ministry is insufficient, judged by the past. One great communion has used up all its reserves, is losing hundreds yearly, sees the average age of its ministers over fifty-five, and is compelled to adopt the Methodist plan of grouping. Meanwhile the population is shifting. Towns are building new suburbs and demolishing slums; new industries create new towns, Domesday manors are depleted, garden cities are planted. In such cases, railways and motor-coach lines soon adjust services to meet the conditions; the directors of multiple-shops soon decide where to

close and where to open. But there is as yet no machinery of any single Communion to meet the situation. In the centre of one town, embedded in shops and offices, there may be two buildings with mere skeleton congregations, yet staffed by two men; while on three sides of it are arising many streets with hundreds of families, distant a mile and a half from any place of worship. Federation might be accomplished on lines that would permit the sale of useless buildings, the erection of new, the re-distribution of the ministers. Such adjustments would, of course, grieve much sentiment, but sentiment is equally grieved by seeing a splendid pile of buildings, fifty years ago a hive of happy Christian life, but now with galleries closed and deep in dust, structure decaying because there are no funds to keep in repair.

Imagine England divided into two hundred areas, each containing about 180,000 people; the size of Oxford or West Sussex; such a unit has proved very workable in Italy and France. Imagine each area with a council on which all the federating bodies are represented; this council being not merely consultative, but having power to act—that is the essence of federation. Such a council could study its area, note what buildings exist, what types of worship were desired, what men were available; and could plan for better distribution of ministers, new buildings, closure or adaptation of existing places. At present, every denomination faces the problem as though no other denomination existed; while action of any kind is rare and timid. It might possibly prove that at first the *status quo* would have to be preserved, in so far that demolition and removals must be left to each federated body; but we do not live in an unchanging *status*, and for new districts the council should be entrusted with authority. To put it otherwise, Extension would be a federal prerogative.

For we must never forget that Union is not an end in itself, only a means to the one end of extending the kingdom of God. Some advocates of Union have spoken at times as though once Free Church ministers have been ordained by bishops, they could sing *Nunc Dimittis*. Free Church ministers do not intend to be ordained by bishops, any more than bishops intend to be baptised by Baptists. Union is valuable not in itself, but that the world generally may once again take notice how Christians love one another, and that Christians may unitedly prosecute their business of winning the world for Christ. For the world is larger than England; if nine out of ten Englishmen are out of touch with any church, what is the proportion in Asia and Africa? A better organisation of Christian effort is needed for the direction of missions overseas.



Union is most desirable. Politically, we see at times great empires shattered to fragments, but soon the fragments begin to cohere. Apart from forcible conquest, what are the familiar lines? Either Savoy may grow into Sardinia, into Italy; or scores of German states, with all sorts of governments, may federate into one Reich. Union may be on unitary lines, or on federal; both may be successful. Now in the present ecclesiastical situation, it seems that the unitary method has been studied, and definitely refused by some important sections. It would seem wise to explore most carefully the possibilities along Federal lines, that in one way, if not in the other, our Lord's wish may be fulfilled, and all may be one, as He is with the Father, in order that the world may be won for Him.

---

*A History of the Baptist Church, Earl Shilton.* By H. W. Fursdon, M.A. 61 pages, illustrated.

Tercentenary volumes may be steadily expected henceforward, and it is good to have such an excellent model; though indeed the earliest date verified for this Leicestershire church is only 1651. Search has been made in national and county public records, in denominational minutes and magazines, with profitable results. The plan has been well conceived, space has not been wasted on general history, or on expounding Baptist principles. A dozen chapters set out the story of the village community in attractive fashion. The growth of the premises can be traced, with the advance from an open-air baptistery whence water was sold, to one in an aisle, and at length one in a place of honour. Glimpses are afforded at finance, one minister keeping school, another's wife keeping a draper's shop. The enrichment of worship can be traced, from early days when singing was unknown, to the glorious days of clarinet, hautboy, bassoon and bass viols, to the mechanical age of an organ, and the blossoming of a drum and fife band. Relations with other churches are noted, both in the early Leicestershire Association, the General Assembly, the New Connection, the Union, and three sister churches; here a long-standing libel on Elder Richard Green is nailed to the counter. We gain ideas of many ordinary members, and their diligent service; of support to denominational work, especially Indian missions. Not only was a Sunday school started in 1801, which has been a steady piece of home work, but the premises also housed a day school, which seems to have held on its way nearly to the time of School Boards; we wonder how far we are over-generous in admitting that the "National Society" was largely responsible for rural education. The church is to be congratulated on its life, the pastor on his power to present the story of the past.