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Letting In Some Air

BY ANTHONY HANSON

I MUST say at the outset that, by and large, I found these comments* by Evangelicals on the Anglican-Methodist unity situation to be refreshing and common-sense. They let much air into what has been up till now a rather stuffy room. Above all, their constant insistence that what they call the exclusive theory of episcopacy must not be taken as part of basic Anglicanism is something which was needed at this juncture. In the past Anglo-Catholics have tended to take it for granted that the historic episcopate can be proved as having formed a feature of church order from the time of the apostles. The rest of us have, more or less reluctantly, accepted that this belief must never be actually denied in any negotiations with other Christians. The result has been a considerable amount of make-believe. It is rather like the sort of arguments we used to employ against RC denials of Anglican orders: "We don't believe, of course, that a sacrificing priesthood is of the essence of order, but even if it were, we could still defend the validity of ours'. These three essayists all specifically reject the exclusive doctrine of episcopacy and declare that they will not be bound by it. This is a clear gain.

Dr. J. I. Packer's main objection to the proposed scheme of reunion between Anglicans and Methodists is an effective one. He says that the whole scheme is based on out of date assumptions. These assumptions are (a) that the exclusive doctrine of episcopacy is true and can be proved from Scripture and (b) that ministry is something which belongs primarily to the individual and not to the church, and therefore that, if two churches are to be reconciled, there must be a service of reconciliation for individual ministers as well as a service of reconciliation for the two Churches corporately. I must say I agree with him in rejecting these two assumptions, and in his contention that they underlie the present negotiations.

At the same time I doubt very much whether anything else is likely to be any more successful. Reunion unfortunately is not just a question of squaring the theologians. If it were it would be much easier, because theologians as a whole, having read and studied a bit more than the rest, are less dogmatic and less ridden by prejudice. In the last analysis it is the clergy who have to work any reunion scheme, and the clergy are usually out of date in their theology. I have been attending quite a few clerical conferences on the subject of the Anglican-Methodist negotiations in recent months, and I have the strong impression that a great many Anglo-Catholic clergy still believe that the 'apostolic succession' can be proved from history and still believe that a minister who has not episcopal orders has not got valid orders. The corporate nature of order has not yet penetrated to their thinking and

* *Fellowship in the Gospel*, ed. J. I. Packer, Marcham Manor Press, 15s. 6d.

they still believe that the order-bearing class is ontologically independent of the rest of the church. A great many of them are saying that the proposed service of reconciliation for ministers is meaningless because it does not explicitly claim to be conferring the priesthood on those who do not have it. Dr. Packer's argument convinces me, but I am not one of those who needs to be convinced.

The Reverend C. O. Buchanan's essay I enjoyed most of the three: he is clear, cheerful, and at times devastating. I heartily applaud the point he makes about the sort of episcopacy we are expecting the Methodists to accept (p. 50). It is obvious that he has in fact a very high conception of episcopacy; he values it and is very far from wanting to dispense with it. But the sort of episcopacy we have in the Church of England is just about the worst model to offer in the entire Anglican Communion, and the way we are proposing to introduce it into Methodism would seem to make it still more unsatisfactory from the pastoral and theological point of view. What he wants is 'a diocese of not more than sixty or so parishes . . . and no suffragan bishops or other episcopal curates'. We seem in fact to be moving farther away from this at the moment rather than nearer.

He also on p. 58 makes an interesting suggestion, which might offer a way out of the apparent impasse: 'the alternative way forward would be to abolish the second of the two services whilst still leaving the laying on of hands in the first service'. This would mean in effect maintaining the good theological principle that it is the union of churches that unites the ministry, but at the same time making the act of union to take the form of a mutual commissioning of ministers. I hope this will be given serious consideration.

Mr. Buchanan's final suggestion (p. 64) is that we start all over again and ignore any service of reconciliation for the ministers—in fact the CSI method. As a former presbyter of CSI, I am naturally attracted by this, but would it work? Would it not encounter all the objections from uninformed Anglo-Catholic clergy that the present scheme is meeting? If they reject the present scheme because it is not sufficiently explicit in conferring priesthood, surely they will make even more rumpus over a scheme that doesn't attempt to confer anything at all on the individual minister? It may be that some Anglo-Catholics are now saying: 'We would prefer a CSI-type scheme'; but I very much fear that if they were offered one, a whole class of objectors would appear, holding up their hands in horror at 'unordained ministers'.

I liked quite a lot of Mr. Duffield's essay: in particular I liked his distinction on p. 71 between open communion and free communion. Open Communion means communion between all Christians who are in good standing. Free communion means just asking no questions. There is much to be said for the former; the latter is simply an act of abrogation of its authority by the church.

At the end I would like to make three criticisms of this booklet, valuable though it is. First, on p. 37 Dr. Packer writes: 'There were disturbing suggestions that the united church should be free from the historical Anglican linkage with the state'. Is it possible that Evangelicals still look on Parliament as a defence against ecclesiastical

innovation? I can hardly believe that they are as unrealistic as that. Second, Mr. Duffield still seems to suffer from a little Roman phobia. On p. 72 he links Roman Catholics with Salvationists and Quakers as people who, because of their attitude towards the eucharist, should be only accepted for communion in emergencies. This seems to me to be dangerously out-dated. The modern Roman Catholic is in certain ways closest of all to the Anglican. Thirdly, on p. 15 Dr. Packer declares: 'The historic episcopate is an ecclesiastical development which . . . is completely without foundation in the New Testament'. This is too sweeping a statement: the foundation can be found, I believe, in the Pastoral Epistles. The Evangelical case on this question is quite sufficiently strong to be able to dispense with dangerous generalisations such as this.