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Editorial

A time to unite

In a recent book, which has just been published in England by Paternoster Press, the well-known Methodist theologian Geoffrey Wainwright has made out the case that *The Ecumenical Moment* for reunion of the divided churches of Christendom is now. Major international discussions of the issues which continue to separate us have come to a head with the publication of a number of reports in the last year or two, and a fresh round of conversations has already begun.

As far as Anglicans are concerned, 1984 will see the appearance of the results of discussions with the Lutherans and with the Reformed churches, as well as the first fruits of second-stage negotiations with the Orthodox. ARCIC-2 is off the ground as well, though its deliberations are certain to last longer. This is appropriate, because the issues at stake are more crucial and of much greater potential significance than is the case with the others. On top of all that, there is the ongoing 'reception' of the Lima Report of the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC on the subjects of *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*. This is supposed to be discussed by all the member churches of the WCC, and there are signs here and there that small groups have begun to take it seriously as the starting-point for further discussion.

The position of evangelicals in all this is very difficult to assess, for a number of reasons. Evangelicals do not constitute a church, and in this sense are much harder to pin down than Catholics. Many of our spiritual brethren reject formal church structures of any kind, and respond to the faintest suggestion of ecumenism with an even more radical separatism. Others react to this regrettable tendency with a policy which can be called co-operation at any price; whatever else happens, evangelicals must not appear to be wreckers from outside.

Somewhere in between these extremes is the silent majority, not quite sure where to turn or what to expect. Unity is obviously a good thing and nobody would set out to cause unnecessary division, but, on the other hand, church union of any serious kind would probably mean such a rocking of the present comfortable boat that it is best deferred *sine die*. Most of us continue to muddle along as before, hoping, like Mr Micawber, that something will turn up which everybody can recognize as an answer to prayer.

Unfortunately for us, the pace of negotiations is intensifying at an ever greater speed, and we may find ourselves swept up in an unstoppable movement before we are fully aware of what is happening. Cynics will argue that General Synod is the best defence

against rash decision-making, or against any decision-making at all, so that there is really no need to be concerned; but this attitude, if it exists, is irresponsible and will probably turn out in the end to be self-defeating.

Evangelicals need to get involved in the current ecumenical scene, but without losing their distinctiveness. We have a message for the wider church of Christ which is vitally important, and which must not be fudged in compromise verbiage, of which inter-church commissions are masters.

The first principle we must uphold is that of *orthodoxy*. There is no room in the church for liberalism of the type that denies the divinity of Christ, or goes soft on moral issues. Heresy hunts are obviously dangerous, and may be unfair to the unfortunate victims, but they are a lesser evil than the kind of tolerance which allows anything and everything to be paraded as another 'insight' into the riches of God's love. Here we must join hands with Roman Catholics and Orthodox to insist that belief does matter, and press our own bishops and synods to discipline those within our own church who flaunt their infidelity as a sign of their maturity and academic integrity.

The second principle we must uphold is that of *spirituality*. There is no point in defending dead orthodoxy, and much need to clarify the spiritual basis on which we operate, and which we claim should be the norm for the church. The evangelical Christian differs from the Roman not so much on first principles as on the means by which they are secured.

We both believe that the God of the Bible is the creator, redeemer and sanctifier of mankind, a Trinity of persons whom we know and worship in love. We both believe that man is sinful and unable to save himself, that only the grace of God can lift us out of our predicament and give us a living fellowship with him. We both believe that Christ is the almighty judge, who at the last day will reveal the secrets of every heart, and claim those who are his to be his brethren in eternity.

All these things, and many more besides, we hold in common, and it is essential that we recognize and give thanks to God for that fact. But at the same time we differ from our Catholic brethren on the means whereby these principles are communicated to us and made to live in the church, and here we must continue, in the heritage of Martin Luther, to protest that ours is the way more faithful to the teaching of Scripture, as well as to that of the early church.

To be specific: Is it part of the gospel that we should accept the government of a bishop with a rather shaky claim to apostolic authority? If not, what possible role can the pope expect to have in a reunited church?

Is it part of the gospel that we should contribute in some way to our own salvation? Wainwright in his book quotes from the Roman

Catholic theologian Edward Schillebeeckx as saying that Protestants have not understood the Roman dogmas concerning Mary because they do not accept that they can play any meritorious role in their own salvation. Obviously, leading Roman Catholic theologians believe that we can co-operate with God in this way, and this needs to be winkled out by ARCIC-2.

To proclaim justification by faith alone is not to divide the church, but to provide it with the only possible basis on which it can exist. What 'justification by faith alone' teaches us is that man and God are joined in a personal relationship based on undeserved divine love. To introduce the idea of merit turns this relationship into a contract, with results which are as fatal as a contractual view of marriage. God does not say to us: 'If you do this, I shall do that in return', but 'While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us'—the very heart of the gospel message.

Here there is no room for compromise, with Rome or with anybody else. As long as we are not agreed—and in this case, agreement means acceptance by Rome of the Protestant view—there can be no unity. We cannot say that such agreement is impossible, but centuries of experience would suggest that it will not come easily or quickly. By all means let us pray and work towards it, but let us do so with our eyes firmly fixed on our duty to witness to the truth of Christ, whatever the cost, and not on banner headlines or spectacular acts of reconciliation which only confuse the underlying issues and lead to greater disappointment when the detailed discussions come up against the inevitable pitfalls.

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