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

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

Church Relations in England

BY THE REV. PROF. J. P. HICKINBOTHAM, M.A.

THE Archbishop's Cambridge Sermon of 1946 began a new approach to the reunion problem in England. He suggested, first, that owing to the difficulties inherent in organic reunion (the amalgamation of the Churches into one body) we should try to secure intercommunion between the Churches as a first step. This, he thought, might bring the Churches closer together in worship and devotion and so prepare the way for full reunion to become a practical possibility. Secondly, he suggested that in order to make full intercommunion possible, the Free Churches might "take episcopacy into their systems"—establish bishops, consecrated by bishops in the historic succession as part of their ministry, and make episcopal ordination their rule for the future. This, he thought, would enable the Free Churches to develop their use of episcopacy "on their own ground", and while retaining the essential historic functions of the bishop enable them to produce a form of episcopacy which would be in some respects different from, and by no means necessarily inferior to, the Anglican model.

For over three years a conference of representatives appointed by the Archbishop and the Free Churches respectively worked on the proposals, and last September produced the Report, *Church Relations in England*.¹ This Report sets out the unanimous view of the Conference as to the steps that will have to be taken if the proposals are to be put into practice. The members are not unanimous in commending this policy; but many on both sides are ready to do so and all are on record as pleading "that no Communion should refuse this way towards closer unity except under an inescapable sense of obligation". The Archbishop has deliberately postponed submitting the Report to Convocation for a year, in order to give the Church as a whole the opportunity of studying it carefully. So when decisions are made on it in a few months time, no one will be able to grouse unless he has taken this opportunity and played his full part in forming the mind of the Church. Do you want Convocation to authorise detailed negotiations with any of the Free Churches which may be willing on the basis which the Report sets out as the necessary implication of the Archbishop's proposals? Let us consider what this basis is, and then examine some of its implications.

I

The proposed basis is summed up in six points, which must be taken together as related parts of a single whole. First, the Church of England and the Free Church would each declare themselves satisfied that the other maintains the apostolic Gospel. Secondly, the Free Church would adopt an episcopate consecrated by bishops in the historic succession and make episcopal ordination its rule for the future, and the Church of England would recognise such consecrations and ordinations. The same liberty of interpretation about episcopacy and priesthood as exists in the Church of England would be allowed.

¹ S.P.C.K., 2/6.

Thirdly, baptised communicants of the Free Church would be officially authorised to receive Communion in the Church of England, and Anglicans would be officially authorised to receive Communion from episcopally ordained members of the Free Church. Fourthly, the Church of England, without making it a condition of intercommunion, would express the hope that episcopal Confirmation would become widely, and in the end, generally, used in the Free Church. Fifthly, the Free Church would maintain its existing fellowship with non-episcopal Churches, and the Church of England would not regard this as a barrier to intercommunion with the Free Church. Sixthly, both Churches would agree that the existence of parallel Churches in communion with each other in the same area ought not to be more than a temporary stage on the road to full unity. As they stand, these proposals would only gradually lead to the establishment of an episcopally ordained ministry in the Free Church. The Report notes that this would cause difficulties, and suggests that they would be avoided if some satisfactory form of further commissioning for existing ministers could be worked out. This, of course, would also enable the Church of England from the start to authorise its members to receive Communion from *any* minister of the Free Church.

This, then, is the proposed basis of negotiation between the Church of England and individual Free Churches. Stated baldly as it is above, it may sound rather like a merely diplomatic device for getting over our practical difficulties. But it comes as the conclusion of a Report which is mostly occupied with a serious theological discussion of the issues involved, and it is out of three years of common theological study—as well as common prayer and fellowship—that the proposals have emerged. It is in the light of the truth of the Gospel that these proposals must be judged; and one of the advantages of the Joint Conference has been that, not being charged with practical inter-church negotiations, it has been the more free to consider the Archbishop's suggestions in that light and to relate its own findings to the fundamental theological issues.

It starts with a chapter on the nature of the Church. This is the necessary starting point. There can be no question of fellowship in Holy Communion between bodies which do not in some real sense recognise each others' churchly character. To have intercommunion with a body which we thought to be cut off from—schismatic from—the Church of Christ would be sheer disloyalty on our part to the Gospel and to the People of God. The Report frankly recognises that there can be schism not only *from* the Church but *within* the Church. What we are aiming at is not the bringing back of erring members to the Church but a healing of divisions within the Church.

From this an important consequence follows. The New Testament Church was visibly one; its only groupings were geographical ones, the local *ecclesiae* of Corinth, Galatia, etc., which each represented the universal *ecclesia* in its particular locality and each of which was in full communion with all the others. There were no "denominations"; and therefore our present denominational organisations have no counterpart in the New Testament. We therefore cannot say of any of our denominational "Churches" that they are Churches in the

full New Testament sense of the word. They are, indeed, the nearest thing that exists to the New Testament Church, and it is through them that at present the life and fellowship of the Body of Christ is mediated to and experienced by the faithful. But because of our divisions they cannot fully manifest that life. Only a Church united as the New Testament Church was can do that. We have, therefore, not only to recognise that there can be schism within the Church, but that as a result of that schism *all* parts of the Church are in one way or another defective, and fail to show forth the full character of the New Testament Church, though *all* parts do in their own measure and to some extent embody and mediate the life of that Church. The question which has to be faced, therefore, is not "Do you recognise the other Church as a Church?" ; but "Do both Churches, while both confessing their own defectiveness, regard each other as sufficiently embodying and mediating the life of the Body of Christ to justify intercommunion?"

It follows from this conviction that we cannot be content with Churches which, even if they have intercommunion with each other, are still separated from each other. The full life of the Church can only be manifested in full unity—a single Church with a single congregation representing it in each place. Hence the importance of the sixth point of the basis: intercommunion can only be accepted as a stage on the road to full unity. Moreover, the Holy Communion is itself the Sacrament of unity, and there is something anomalous in a celebration of it by those who in their Church life are still divided. If there were no intention to overcome that disunity such a celebration might well be worse than anomaly—a piece of spiritual insincerity. Only when we and our Churches are solemnly pledged to seek after full unity can we with real meaning join together in the Sacrament of unity. If, as the Archbishop proposes, intercommunion is to precede reunion it must nevertheless have reunion as its goal and must keep that goal in sight.

II

We have sketched the fundamental starting point from which any discussion of intercommunion between Churches ought to proceed. We now have to ask ourselves whether in the case of the Church of England and the English Free Churches, the particular bodies with which we are concerned, they can, while acknowledging their own defectiveness compared with New Testament standards, recognise each other as sufficiently embodying and mediating the life of the Church to justify participation in each others' Sacraments. The Report therefore proceeds to examine our agreements and disagreements in doctrine—for the life of the Church is life lived by faith, evoked by and responsive to the Gospel of the grace of God, and this faith is intellectually formulated in the Church's doctrine. Radical disloyalty to the fundamentals of the Christian faith (such as, e.g., denial of the doctrine of the Trinity) would, in the opinion of the Conference, constitute schism *from* the Church rather than division *within* it.

The Report here is hopeful. "On the doctrines of God the Father,

the Person and Work of Christ, the Person and mission of the Holy Spirit, the Trinity, and the Life Everlasting, we have found nothing which separates any one of these Communions from another. All acknowledge the apostolic faith as contained in the Scriptures and expressed in the Creeds." Recent developments of biblical theology, with their emphasis on the fact that "to be 'in Christ' is to be incorporated into the Body of Christ and to share in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit", have further cemented this unity. Point one of the proposed basis—recognition by each Church that the other maintains the apostolic Gospel—is vital, and would need (in the opinion of the Conference) to be based on the common conviction that "the Holy Scriptures contain sufficiently all doctrine required of necessity for eternal salvation through faith in Jesus Christ".

There are, however, differences to which the Report gives consideration. Some Churches lay emphasis on formal subscription to the Creeds, while others object to them. But it is made plain that such objection is not based on doubt concerning the truth of the affirmations made in the Creeds. These are accepted by all the Churches represented in the Conference, and all "acknowledge the Scriptures as the rule and standard of faith and life".

Differences over justification by faith are shown to be due to misunderstanding of each others' doctrines, or to perversion of the teaching of the Church by some of their individual members. All are agreed that there is no place for works as a ground of justification, and that justification by faith must not be expounded in such a way as to isolate it from sanctification or put the Sacraments and membership of the visible Church in a secondary position. In regard to the doctrine of the Sacraments, there is an impressive list of agreements between the Churches, and where there are differences (over regeneration, the eucharistic sacrifice, and the mode of our Lord's presence in the eucharist) they are shown to be differences which exist *within* as well as *between* the Churches. As they cut right across denominational boundaries there is ground for holding that they are not strictly relevant to the question of intercommunion between denominational Churches. In this connection it is worth recalling the Agreement for Intercommunion between the Church of England and the Old Catholic Churches which is quoted elsewhere in the Report. "Intercommunion," says this Agreement, "does not require from either Communion the acceptance of all doctrinal opinion, sacramental devotion, or liturgical practice characteristic of the other, but implies that each believes the other to hold all the essentials of the Christian faith".

So far well and good. But Christian doctrine includes the doctrine of the Church and Ministry, and here there are serious differences. In the chapter on the Church the Report shows that some people start from the belief that the Church is constituted by the ministration of Word and Sacraments, so that wherever men are bound together in the grace-faith relationship established by the use of these means of grace, there is the visible Church of Christ, whatever be its outward form and order. Others start from the belief that the Church is an outwardly and historically continuous society, the necessary marks of

this continuity being a particular form of ministry as well as the Scriptures, the creeds and the sacraments.

This difference is focussed in the divergence it produces about the doctrine of the Ministry, which is therefore taken up and more fully discussed in the chapter which follows the discussion on the Faith of the Church. For those who hold the former view, different types of ministry constitute no obstacle to intercommunion; for those who hold the latter it is impossible to contemplate intercommunion with a Church whose ministry is not the one which is the divinely appointed means for guaranteeing the validity of the Sacrament. A rite celebrated by others than those who are believed to be duly ordained by God for the purpose may be spiritually efficacious, but it cannot be assumed to be the same thing as the Sacrament which Christ has appointed in His Church. It is therefore essential that, if there is to be intercommunion, there shall be sufficient agreement (in practice if not in theory) for all parties to be able to be sure that the Sacraments of all the Churches concerned are administered by those whom they can recognise as duly qualified to do so.

The Report points out that this is not a simple question of a difference between the Church of England on the one hand and the Free Churches on the other. There are many Anglicans who hold the former view, and there are still some Free Churchmen who hold the latter view. But in practice the Anglican Church stands for the maintenance of a separated order of bishops within the ministry, and for an historically continuous succession of episcopal ordinations, and to many Anglicans this is a necessary condition for recognising the validity of sacraments. The question therefore is whether the Free Churches can, for the sake of unity and without sacrifice of principle, adapt their own ministries so as to "take episcopacy into their systems".

This is a matter for the Free Churches to decide. It is pointed out that episcopacy is not to be confused with autocracy and that the Free Churches have already adapted their Ministries so as to provide for ministers who are specially charged with the pastoral care of their fellow-ministers. They have also, long since, agreed that episcopacy would be an element in the reunited Church of the future. Could they now adopt it as a means to intercommunion and so as a step towards that future reunited Church? For Anglicans it is necessary that they should do so if complete and formal intercommunion is to be established, in order to satisfy the consciences of those Anglicans who hold episcopacy to be necessary guarantee of the validity of the Sacraments. Hence it constitutes the second point of the proposed basis. But Anglicans who do not thus regard episcopacy will assuredly be as anxious as the Free Churches themselves to make quite sure that if the Free Churches accept episcopacy they shall be as free as we are in the Church of England to hold a fully 'evangelical' interpretation of it. There are many Anglicans who would hold that the highly improbable event of the conversion of the Free Churches to an 'Anglo-Catholic' view of episcopacy would be an unmitigated disaster for the whole Church.

The necessary functions of bishops are listed as ordination, decision

in concurrence with presbyters and laity in changes in doctrine and policy, and pastoral oversight over ministers and congregations. The Anglican members of the Conference did not insist on Confirmation by the bishop as a necessary condition of admission to Communion, but recorded the hope that episcopal Confirmation would come in the end to be generally used. Anglicans can take this position because, while the rule of episcopal Confirmation has been normal since primitive times and has great value, there have been many exceptions to the requirement of it as a condition of admission to Communion. Hence point four of the proposed basis.

The adoption of episcopacy does not, of course, in itself, preclude fellowship with non-episcopal Churches. The Lutheran Churches of Finland, Latvia, and Estonia, for example, while themselves episcopal, are in full communion with the non-episcopal Lutheran Churches. Moreover, the Church of England itself has formal and canonical agreements for limited intercommunion with these episcopal Lutheran Churches and has not regarded their fellowship with non-episcopal Churches as a barrier to this. Quite obviously no Free Church is going to adopt episcopacy in order to have intercommunion with the Church of England if by doing so it must also cut itself off from its existing fellowship with other Free Churches. The Church of England has never in the past suggested that such a condition should be imposed as one of the terms of agreement for fuller fellowship with other Churches, and to do so would be to close the door finally to all hope of progress towards unity. Hence point five of the proposed basis, safeguarding the present fellowship between the Free Churches.

The Report notes the existence within the Church of England at present of those who question the rightness of the policy which has hitherto been followed. Here is the most crucial issue which the Report raises for Anglicans. To ask a Church to break off its present relationships in order to enter into relationships with us would be not only to ask the impossible. It would be to ask something which would stultify the whole project. The aim is to heal the divisions in Christendom. But this condition would create a new division at the very moment that it healed another. Anglicans must either accept point five wholeheartedly, as perhaps an anomaly but a justifiable one in the process of getting the Church out of the far greater anomaly of disunion, or they must tear up existing agreements, reverse a policy hitherto unquestioned, and slam the door in the face of the whole movement towards Christian unity.

III

We have now traversed the main points of the Report, and it will be seen that the six points of the proposed basis arise out of genuine study of the theological issues.

(i) We can consider intercommunion if we recognise internal schism in the Church and see each other as all in imperfect ways manifesting the life of the Body of Christ. But because the Church cannot manifest that life fully save in unity we cannot contemplate intercommunion as a final goal: it must be a stage on the road to full unity (point six).

(ii) If we are to recognise each other as sufficiently manifesting the

life of the Body of Christ to justify participation in each others' Sacraments we must each be assured that the other is loyal to the apostolic Gospel ; and this assurance will be grounded on the common acceptance of the authority of Scripture (point one).

(iii) We must also be assured that each other's Sacraments are valid ; hence (to satisfy the conscience of those who connect this validity with the episcopal succession in the ministry) the necessity for the acceptance of bishops and episcopal ordination, though with liberty of interpretation about their meaning (point two).

(iv) While Confirmation by the bishop is a *normal* function of the episcopate, it cannot be claimed that there are no known exceptions to it, or that Confirmation has invariably been a condition of admission to Communion. Hence the hope of Anglicans that it may become general, but their refusal to insist on it as a condition of intercommunion (point four).

(v) Nor does episcopacy preclude fellowship with non-episcopal Churches ; therefore the existing fellowship of the Free Churches with non-episcopal Churches is safeguarded—as would indeed be essential if the scheme were to promote unity and not substitute one division for another (point five).

(vi) Point three really rounds the matter off by stating that the aim of the whole procedure would be achieved and that the Church of England would officially authorise reception to—Communion of Free Church communicants, and the reception of Communion by Anglicans from episcopally ordained Free Church ministers.

Two points not mentioned in the Report may be touched upon in conclusion. First, the fact that we have not got, but are seeking, official written agreements for full intercommunion with the Free Churches must not be taken as meaning that we have *no* intercommunion with them yet. It is a matter left for the most part to the individual's conscience ; but there is far more authority in Anglican tradition and custom for admitting a Free Churchman to communion when he wishes to participate than there is for refusing him. Let us steadily and publicly assert this custom as the true Anglican tradition. There is also a strong customary authority under which Anglicans are free to communicate with non-episcopal Churches in Scotland and overseas. Now that the Free Churches are no longer thought of as mere schismatic bodies, the main theological obstacle to occasional Communion with them also has disappeared ; and the propriety of this custom should be strongly upheld.

The second point is this. Why is the decision on this Report to be made by the purely clerical Convocations ? Why not the Church Assembly with its House of Laity ? Is not this a matter in which the laity are vitally concerned and on which they ought to speak ? Is the Church of England never going to throw off its narrow clericalism and form for itself a governing body which includes a genuine representation of the laity as well as of the clergy ? Other Anglican provinces have done it. Let us learn from them. The Church must act as a body ; it cannot do so when the great mass of its membership is not represented in the organisation which takes the crucial decisions. The Report lays down as a function of bishops that of decision, in

concurrence with clergy and laity, in changes in doctrine and policy. Let the Church of England itself act on that recommendation, both in the letter and the spirit. Let it abolish the Convocations and replace them by a Synod in which bishops, clergy, and laity have an equal voice and all three participate on equal terms in taking responsible decisions.

The Fulness of Christ

BY THE REV. CANON ALAN RICHARDSON, D.D.

SHORTLY after the publication in 1947 of *Catholicity*, the Report presented by a group of Anglo-Catholics to the Archbishop of Canterbury in response to his Grace's request, the Archbishop invited the Archdeacon of Sheffield to collect a group of Anglican Evangelicals to prepare a parallel document. This has now been published under the title *The Fulness of Christ*.¹ It had been preceded by *The Catholicity of Protestantism*,² a similar statement produced by a group of leading Free Church theologians. The three Reports together form an illuminating conspectus of the principal ways of approach to the problems of theology and churchmanship which are dominant amongst the leaders of English Christianity to-day. Perhaps what is lacking in their total presentation is the point of view of those Anglicans who would not like to be called either Anglo-Catholics or Evangelicals, but who are simply content to be Anglicans (of whom the present writer is one); but, as we shall notice, the new Report to a large extent speaks for them. Whereas the Free Church document deals at length with the palpable and unscholarly errors which marred the attempt of *Catholicity* to state the Protestant view, *The Fulness of Christ* sets out to state positively its authors' convictions quite independently of the earlier Anglican work. These convictions are presented clearly, cogently and unpolemically.

One question, however, persistently recurs to the reader as he turns the pages of the Report. What is there in the general position which it advocates which could be termed distinctively evangelical? What does the word 'evangelical' signify as used to designate the standpoint here presented? Certainly not the evangelicalism of such older leaders as H. C. G. Moule or Griffith Thomas, or even of Henry Wace or H. E. Ryle. Nor is it the Liberal Evangelicalism of Vernon Storr and the A.E.G.M. The writers of the Report are in no sense near-fundamentalist, like the older evangelical leaders. Nor, on the other hand, are they mildly and inoffensively 'liberal protestant' like the 'liberal evangelicals' of recent times. What, in fact, does the word 'evangelical' stand for in theology to-day? Many will doubtless think they know what it stands for ecclesiastically—it means surplices instead of vestments, no laymen inside the sanctuary, and Mattins at eleven o'clock. But what theological implication does the word carry?

Perhaps wrongly, but certainly extensively, there is a general

¹ S.P.C.K., 3/6.

² Lutterworth Press, 1950, 5/-.