

[*Cheltenham Conference Paper.*]

The Possibilities of Reunion.¹

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SOME of our friends thought that the Findings of last year's Conference were premature, and in some points inexpedient if not actually erroneous. The experience of twelve months has shown that our boldness was largely justified. We may not take all the credit to ourselves for the very satisfactory advances that have been made, but we may fairly claim that we have shown the way to a definiteness of statement and clearness in the declaration of principles that have been productive of good results. During the year various conferences, official and unofficial, public and private, have met to consider questions connected with reunion, and statements of great value have been issued. I have an impression that in some cases Churchmen have been encouraged to go farther perhaps than they would otherwise have gone from the mere fact that they would not be regarded as extremists because the Cheltenham Conference had already gone farther. I think we need not doubt that members of the Non-Episcopal Churches have been encouraged to associate themselves with members of the Church of England in the consideration of the subject by the frank recognition at our last Conference of their membership of the Church of Christ, of their ministries as ministries of grace equally with our own, and of our desire for intercommunion and the interchange of pulpits. These have all been movements in the right direction, and we look forward this year to an advance that will be as clearly marked as that of the last year.

We do not look for an immediate solution of the many difficult problems of reunion. We recognize the practical difficulties that must arise at every stage. But we are glad that we are no longer met on every occasion with appeals for delay and exhortations to postpone any definite action. We are satisfied that there is on every side a growing desire for the removal of our divisions, that there is in high quarters a "passion for reunion." And we believe that to men of good will on all sides there are no impossibilities. The ultimate

¹ This paper was read at the Open Session of the Conference at which visitors were present; it was therefore of a more general character than those that were intended to deal with specific points in the Lambeth Quadrilateral.

consummation may take a long period for its achievement. We look for no sudden results. We believe we are on the right lines. We pray for and trust in the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We feel that unity is demanded for the sake of our Empire, much more for the sake of Christianity throughout the world, and most of all for the sake of our common Master, whose work can only be carried on ineffectively as long as His Church is divided, as it is, at home and abroad.

Our Conference can contribute, and is, I believe, contributing, suggestions of value both in regard to the principles that are involved and the practical questions that must necessarily arise.

The principles involved have already been considered at the sessions of our Conference.

As Churchmen we accept the resolutions of the Lambeth Conference of the Bishops of the Anglican Communion in 1888, which have since become generally known as the Lambeth Quadrilateral. For clearness we may quote it at length. It was adopted "as supplying the basis on which approach might under God's blessing be made towards reunion" :—

(1) The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as "containing all things necessary to salvation" and as being the rule and ultimate standard of faith.

(2) The Apostles' Creed as the baptismal symbol, and the Nicene Creed as the sufficient statement of the Christian faith.

(3) The two Sacraments ordained by Christ Himself—Baptism and the Supper of the Lord—ministered with unfailing use of Christ's words of institution, and of the elements ordained by Him.

(4) The Historic Episcopate, locally adapted in the methods of its administration to the varying needs of the nations and peoples called of God into the unity of His Church.

To these was added a statement worthy of notice on account of its wording.

"The Committee believe that upon some such basis as this, with large freedom of variation on secondary points of doctrine, worship, and discipline, and without interference with existing conditions of property and endowment, it might be possible, under God's gracious providence, for a United Church, including at least the chief of the Christian Communions of our people, to rest."

Two Lambeth Conferences have been held since then, and while

the quadrilateral basis has been maintained, progress has been made in the examination of some of the practical aspects of its interpretation. In 1897 the Conference passed from the stage of "holding itself in readiness to enter into brotherly conference with other Christian Communities," and reported "that the time has now arrived in which the constituted authorities of the various branches of our Communion should not merely make it known that they hold themselves in readiness to enter into brotherly conference with representatives of other Christian Communities in the English-speaking races, but should themselves originate such conferences and especially arrange for representative meetings for united humiliation and intercession."

This progress was continued at the 1908 Conference. Some of the practical aspects of reunion were more definitely considered, especially in regard to the Moravian and the Presbyterian Churches. In the Encyclical letter of that year reference is made to the fact that they tried "to indicate some lines of definite practical approach."

"Wherever we have had reason to think that such an advance would be welcomed, we have gone far to meet our brethren." But before the consummation of Corporate Reunion is reached, they recognize that there must come a period of preparation, and this preparation must be by co-operation in moral and social endeavour and in promoting the spiritual interests of mankind, by brotherly intercourse, by knowledge of one another's beliefs and practices, and by the increase of mutual understanding and appreciation.

There is much that I should like to quote, but the general aim of that Conference is summed up in the sentence: "We must constantly desire not compromise, but comprehension; not uniformity, but unity."

These points are sufficient to show that the Cheltenham Conference is endeavouring to act in the spirit of the last Lambeth Conference, and to carry out its intention.

Ten years have passed. Conditions have altered. New considerations have arisen. We now urge with all our power an even closer examination of the possibilities of reunion, and press for some more definite approach to the removal of the difficulties in the way. Another Lambeth Conference is due. We do not know when it will be possible to hold it, but we want the Bishops to meet with a mandate from our own Communion, and the assurance of welcome co-

operation from the Non-Episcopal Churches, so that they may carry a stage further the valuable work they have already done.

With a view to assist that purpose we make some suggestions, that we trust will be found of value in the consideration of the questions involved.

It is clear to us all, I think, that reunion at present would be quite possible—as far as principles are concerned—for all the Communities that accept the first three conditions of the Lambeth Quadrilateral—that is the great majority of the Orthodox Churches in the country.

Allowing for considerable varieties of interpretation—as wide even as those that exist within our own Communion—they present no obstacle.

The only one that presents any real obstacle is that regarding the Historic Episcopate, and on it our discussion must of necessity centre.

The simplest solutions of the problem would be either for us of the Anglican Communion to recognize freely and fully all the duly constituted ministries of the Non-Episcopal Churches, and to act upon that recognition, or on the other hand for the ministers of the Non-Episcopal Churches to receive Episcopal ordination.

Neither of these solutions is apparently possible. We as Churchmen are pledged to the Historic Episcopate. We recognize with the Lambeth Conference the position that our Church holds between “the ancient historical Churches” and the more modern Communions. We bear in mind the ultimate reunion of the whole of Christendom, although at present it is impracticable as regards the Roman and Eastern Communions.

We are frankly more concerned to secure Home Reunion. This at least seems to be within measurable distance.

On the other hand, we dare not demand of the ministers of Non-Episcopal Churches submission to Episcopal ordination. If it were freely and voluntarily offered we should welcome it as a solution of the great difficulty of the situation. But if they thought that such a step implied on their part a doubt of their own ministries, and meant turning their back upon their teaching and their office, they would naturally never consent, nor should we have a right to suggest it.

We want to find, then, some method by which the Historic Episcopate can be retained, some means by which those Communions

which have hitherto not had it, can be brought into relationship with it, without any sacrifice of principle on their part. We want some plan by which a bridge can be built across the period of transition when some form of episcopal ministry will be the normal condition of a great re-united Church—a Church wide enough to include the varieties of religious experience and practice found in all our Communions.

In the first place this implies the question: Can the Historic Episcopate be rendered acceptable to the Non-Episcopal Churches, and still retain its character as a distinctive order—or at least office?

Personally, I believe much can be done by a re-interpretation of Episcopacy in the light of the New Testament and of the primitive Church. There are many features of Episcopacy to-day that are stereotyped and are yet no part of its essential characteristics. If we can constitute Episcopacy again according to the conception of the New Testament and remove these excrescent theories, much will be gained. The very expression Apostolic Succession will gain a new and a truer meaning, and will be dissociated from any theory of the transmission of grace. The Episcopal order and its succession in primitive days were a means of securing the continuity of true teaching. Episcopacy was, "the recognized organ of the unity and continuity of the Church."

Dr. Sanday surprised some of us a short time ago by declaring that a new book about to appear would re-establish the old view of Apostolic Succession. The book has appeared, *Essays on the Early History of the Church and Ministry*. I have read it carefully, but I cannot gather that any new facts have been added to those which have been known to students for years. It is admitted that those upon which Bishop Lightfoot built are sound. The only important addition to our knowledge since his day is the discovery of the *Didache*, and it certainly does not support the mediæval theory of Episcopacy. Dean Robinson acknowledges that "Subsequent research has left his [Lightfoot's] position as strong as ever . . . We can hardly say that new facts have come to light which require that his interpretation should be modified."

The theories, therefore, that rest upon these facts have no stronger foundation than they had before, and we have just as strong a case as ever for our interpretation of the essentials of the episcopal office, and our theory of Episcopacy.

But fortunately we are not deeply concerned with any theories of Episcopacy. I have introduced the point to show that we are not blind to the significance that is attached to them.

I do not know how far the recently issued Second Interim Report of the Sub-Committee in connection with the proposed World Conference on Faith and Order represents the Non-Episcopal Communities. If it is accepted by them, it marks the most important stage yet reached, for the Committee accept as one of "the necessary conditions of any possibility of reunion," (1) "That continuity with the Historic Episcopate should be effectively preserved." They say that "members of the Episcopal Churches ought not to be expected to abandon it in assenting to any basis of reunion."

They add a reminder on the lines I have just indicated of "the primitive ideal and practice of Episcopacy," and also add: "That acceptance of the fact of Episcopacy, and not of any theory as to its character, should be all that is asked for. We think that this may be the more easily taken for granted as acceptance, for any such theory is not now required of ministers of the Church of England." Some of us in the ministry of the Church of England are probably nearer to our Non-Episcopal brethren in our theory than to the advanced section of our own Church. It would, no doubt, be necessary, before any arrangement for corporate reunion could be made, to discuss the exact functions which it may be agreed to recognize as belonging to the Episcopate, but we think this can be left for the future.

As Churchmen we heartily acquiesce in the further statement that "the acceptance of Episcopacy on these terms should not involve any Christian community in the necessity of disowning its past, but should enable all to maintain the continuity of their witness and influence as heirs and trustees of types of Christian thought, life, and order, not only of value to themselves, but of value to the Church as a whole."

If these principles are accepted we have, I think, advanced a long way towards making reunion possible. I do not know whether I am expected—or whether it is advisable—to go further. There are some minds of the definitely practical kind that will ask: What is the next step? How is effect to be given to the desire for reunion in practical proposals? I admit these questions are difficult to answer, but there is no question of a way being found if the desire is

sufficiently strong. In Scotland, the General Assemblies of the Established Church and the United Free Church have been able to appoint committees to consider the terms of reunion. I do not know that there is any authoritative body in the Church of England that could adopt a similar course in regard to the other Churches in this country.

But there are various ways in which the changes could be carried out.

We have already co-operation in social work, and we recognize the value of that association, though it is far from meeting all that is required.

The interchange of pulpits is a step that is being pressed, and in which we may soon see considerable progress.

The presence of members of the Non-Episcopal Churches at our Communion ought not to present any difficulties. It may even be claimed that they have a right to communicate in the National Church.

For Churchmen to communicate in the Free Churches presents another set of problems, but no obstacle ought to be raised by other sections of Churchmen if those among us who believe in the Non-Episcopal ministries of grace join with our brethren in their Communions.

But neither interchange of pulpits nor of Communion is sufficient.

Any scheme of federation must find a place for the various Churches as a whole in the united Church. It has been suggested that each Church might be regarded in much the same light as some of the orders are in the Roman Communion, and that the Non-Episcopal ministries should be regarded as of a "prophetic character." They would thus bring their special gifts into the common treasure-house of the Church. This would not be satisfactory as a permanent condition. It *might* be a first step, but it must be regarded as one of a temporary character, suitable for a period of transition during which the nature of Episcopal functions was being settled.

The ultimate aim must be for such an arrangement regarding the ministry as will give all the requisite status of the recognized ministerial orders. Some of us would be glad at once to recognize frankly the Non-Episcopal orders, as was done in the days succeeding the Reformation. Some temporary measures will be necessary until a scheme can be evolved in which the place of the Episcopate will be

clearly settled, and its functions defined. The method of bridging that period is a subject for consideration and discussion.

After all, if we have unity in the acceptance of the Holy Scriptures, in belief in the two Creeds, in the use of the two Sacraments, are not the points that unite us far greater than those that divide? Shall we be kept apart from one another by differences of Church government and organization?

Can we not rely upon the guidance of the Holy Spirit? If to meet the needs of days of old He guided the Church to the adoption of the Episcopal system, may we not trust Him now to guide us to such an adaptation of it to the needs of our own time as shall unite all who love the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity into one great united comprehensive Church.

