

PRESENT POSSIBILITIES AND FUTURE STEPS TOWARDS UNITY.

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THE time has come when in the interests of Unity ambiguities should cease and we should approach the question with clearness of vision and a determination to go straight to the heart of the problem. The theological as distinct from the ecclesiastical aspect demands insistence upon the claim that history cannot be thrown to the winds. We are faced by earnest and honest assertions that the twentieth century will not accept a Christianity that holds the miraculous element essential to its profession. For my part I can conceive of men who have been nurtured in Christian principles and have a profound devotion to our Blessed Lord as the Son of God maintaining their faith while rejecting or explaining away the miraculous in the Gospel. What a few have been able to attain in the stress of modern conceptions of nature and an exaggerated attachment to current hypotheses is a very different matter from acceptance of the historic Figure who is portrayed in the Gospel story. In the web of His life, the warp of His deeds and the woof of His words are so bound up with miracle that we cannot disentangle the natural from the supernatural element—I use the words in their plain sense—and the whole faith of the primitive Church as well as the Church throughout the ages has been based on a living Christ who rose from the dead. We cannot divorce our Faith from history. We are convinced that the sinless One was so unique among men that His deeds can only be described as miraculous, while really natural as being the works of One who was God incarnate, and it is impossible for us in the interests of unity without being false to the revelation of God and writing down the Apostolic Church as founding itself on a series of lies, to make concessions that will reduce our Faith to a series of propositions that cannot be squared with the contents of the only documents we have as the source of the life and teaching of the Son of God.

It may be that individuals will be ready to acknowledge His Divinity while rejecting the fact of His resurrection from the dead. I do not exclude them from brotherhood—that is their own affair,

not mine—but the basis of belief that will form the foundation of the great Church the future will see united in one by bonds of spirit and a common orientation of faith, must hold the ultimate fact of the Resurrection if it is not to perish through lack of faithfulness to its sources and belief in its history. Mithraism was the great rival of Christianity. It had its ennobling ideals and gripped some of the best minds of the early Christian ages. It broke down through an idealism divorced from fact—historic fact—and the doom, not the reconstruction, of Christianity will be pronounced by any acceptance of a creedless Christianity or a studied vagueness that is supposed to meet the requirements of a kaleidoscopic age. Creeds do not give spiritual life. They do not even guarantee moral consistency. A man may be as orthodox as the Devil and as wicked too. But Christian truth is a matter of the intellect as well as an emotion of the heart. We must know what we believe concerning Him who is our life. That knowledge is contained in the New Testament, and the evacuation of its plain meaning can only end in the overthrow in time of the faith we profess to hold.

On the other hand the institution that the Faith has created as a permanent home for its followers is of less importance than the Faith itself. Just as intellectual definitions are inferior to the Person of Christ, so the human instrumentality that constitutes the home of the faithful is inferior to the Christ Himself. The Church to be true to its function is a body founded on Christ that grows up into Christ its living Head. It is a means to an end—not an end in itself. If this be true concerning the Church, it is still more true concerning its organisation. Membership of the Church, for its vitality depends finally on no outward link uniting individuals with the body, but on personal living union with the Saviour Himself. Spiritual life is as great a reality as animal life. We are aware that we are alive as men. We must be equally alive to the fact that our spiritual life is a reality depending on our sharing the life of Christ. The way in which this knowledge comes into consciousness may elude definition—it is there when the soul of man rises above the temporal and homes itself in God. All who truly love and follow the Risen Christ are true sons of God—joint heirs with Jesus Christ. Collectively they constitute the Church of the living God, and all the organisation of the Church is a means for maintaining corporate life in an historical institution, and preventing it from becoming

inefficacious as an instrument for the extension of the Kingdom of God.

To-day we suffer from either an unstudied or a deliberate ambiguity in the use of the words Church, Ministry and Apostolic succession. I am not sure that we have not created a new ambiguity in the employment of the phrase Historic Episcopate. Until we have a definite and accepted interpretation of these phrases all thoughts of Christian Unity with any hope of permanence may be dismissed as a fatuous dream. We have schemes discussed that imply the Church of God to be definitely limited to an Institution that has a certain type of Ministry—commonly called the Church—with an impassable gulf between it and the laity. The Ministry is confined to men ordained by one of the orders of the ministry, and that order has its claim to superiority resting on a supposed historical transmission from age to age by a certain process of setting apart men for the Ministry. All who wish for unity must either now or in the future submit to that ideal, and we are told that unless those who submit to ordination acknowledge by their action the theory involved as true there is no room for them in the Church. That ideal is in no sense the ideal found in the New Testament or in primitive Christianity. The upholders of this theory have to face the awkward fact that in Egypt to the middle of the second century nothing was known of the alleged necessity of episcopal ordination for a valid exercise of the ministry. To-day it is forced on us by the experience of our home work and the triumphs of the mission field that the non-episcopal ministries and work are as richly blessed as those of episcopal Churches, and it is only a purblind logic that asserts we find ministries of grace valid for the members of the non-episcopalian Churches, and not valid for those who are privileged to be members of episcopal Churches. If the real test of Churchmanship be living union with the head of the Church, then the fact that a ministry is truly a ministry of grace involves that all who are brought under its influence and are participators of its worship—whether they be Episcopalians or non-Episcopalians—are in the way of receiving grace. The implication that a type of ministry honoured by God should be dishonoured by men, who in agreement with a supposed Christian principle abstain from participating in its sacraments, means that man sits in judgment and pronounces an adverse verdict on the work of God.

The sooner, therefore, we free ourselves of any superiority on account of our historical position as specially privileged recipients of the grace of God, the better for our Christian life. I cannot for one moment write down as spiritually inferior, or as organically spurious, the great non-episcopal Churches whose numbers far exceed those of the Church of England, and whose work has been signally honoured by God. I hold as firmly as any man the fact that until the unity of the Church was broken by the sins and failures of episcopal Christianity, Episcopacy was the prevailing form of Church government for more than a millennium—but it was not a millennium of healthy, spiritual development and moral progress, or justifiable institutional growth. The fifteenth century, with its united Western Church, is not a model to be aimed at by those who wish to follow the King and do His will. The verdict of the Council of Trent is sufficient proof of that. We must aim at a Flock with many Folds, not a Church with a number of Orders whose present state is in complete contrast with the spirit that gave rise to their existence. They may be, as they have been, institutionalised out of all relation to their aims and ideals.

In practice we must be prepared to admit the full validity for all Christendom of the Orders of men who are set apart for the ministry by the great non-episcopal Churches. Re-ordination will confer no new grace—will not regularise in the sight of God their ministry, although it may regularise it from the standpoint of individual communities—folds of the one flock. There is absolutely no hope or prospect of the non-episcopal Churches accepting re-ordination as a gift from God necessary for increased validity or Church Catholic regularity of their ministry. They know this, and while willing to accept the overseership of Bishops, they are not ready to accept the theory attached to Episcopacy without which Episcopacy is meaningless in the opinion of those who insist on the Church acting as if their view of Episcopacy is the only possible one. The day will come when that theory will be frankly abandoned, after undergoing many transformations in the desperation of its upholders to defend it in the light of modern knowledge. That day is not yet, and until it comes we must maintain our strong protest against the claims put forward in its support.

We have come to see that until the Table of the Lord is acknowledged to be the Table round which all His followers, irrespective of

their denominationalism, may freely gather, we cannot talk of Christian unity. Anything short of this is a caricature of the spirit of Christ. When the fruits of a godly life and the profession of a living faith in the Saviour are vouched for by a responsible Christian community, there is something almost blasphemous in man saying "The gift of the Holy Sacrament is not for you—it is only for those who accept it as exclusively theirs on whom episcopal hands have been laid." Surely such a doctrine and practice is nothing but a sin against the whole teaching of Him who said "do this in remembrance of Me!" If baptism can be administered by a layman, why should the Lord's Table be confined to those who have received episcopal confirmation, to those who have either been confirmed directly as in England, confirmed in bulk as in some continental countries, confirmed by a priest in infancy with the chrism consecrated by a priest? There is something repulsively magical in the contention that will admit the indirectly confirmed by the Bishop with the oil he has blessed, and will exclude men whose life and work are honoured by God and His Church.

The principle laid down will involve our not refusing to communicate at the Lord's Table when the consecration has been the act of a non-episcopally ordained man full of the Holy Ghost and of faith. To do this is not reason to our Church, which is one of many folds. Brotherliness demands it when occasion arises, and abstention from so doing partakes of Pharisaism when we look upon the position with the eyes of the New Testament saints. The Table of the Lord gives the great opportunity for showing our brotherhood. That opportunity must be reciprocal if it is to be in any sense real.

We in Cheltenham speak plainly, and the convictions of no one man govern the findings of the Conference. The hour has arrived for a step forward, and it is only in accord with the Findings of the past for us to declare that no ministry of grace blessed by God is not in accord with His will, that no ministry has any inherent superiority in His sight over other ministries of a different institutional type, that unity is not the child of a uniform Church government, and that the Table of the Lord is the place where the spirit of unity must be shown before any real federated institutional unity in one great Church with many folds and many forms of government faces the world that has to be won to God.

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