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# The Union of the Churches

## *The Present Position*

BY THE RIGHT REV. STEPHEN NEILL, M.A.

IT has often been remarked that, in the history of the Church, periods of divisiveness alternate with periods when movements towards reunion of the churches develop. At a time when dogmatic emphasis is strong and absolute purity of faith seems to be the most important thing of all, it cannot but follow that difference of theological conviction or even of theological formulation leads very easily to ecclesiastical separation. At another time, when the Church is conscious of its weakness in face of a hostile world, when theological controversies are seen in perhaps a better proportion, and when the element of charity in the life of the Church comes to be recognised as no less important than the equally necessary Christian virtue of truth, there is a tendency for churches to lay down their arms, and to grow together in a sense of oneness, even though there be no immediate recovery of outward unity of ecclesiastical order.

There can be no doubt that we are living in the second type of period. During this century, separated churches in several countries have come together in actual unions. Conversations and negotiations are going on in many parts of the world. It is probable that there never has been a time in the history of the Church when the subject of Christian unity has attracted as much attention as it does to-day. The formation of the World Council of Churches, the first Assembly of which is to be held at Amsterdam in August, 1948, is one expression of the recognition by many churches of the manifest truth that to-day for the first time in history the Church of Christ is a world-wide Church, and also that that Church, if it is to survive and do its Lord's work in a hostile and menacing world, must accept the obligation laid upon it by the Lord Himself that the Church should be one even as He is one.

The World Council of Churches is not concerned primarily with movements for the corporate union of separated Churches. If it is to be true to its title, it cannot but be deeply interested in all such movements, and it cannot but emphasise continuously the theological foundations on which the unity of the Church must rest, and on which alone it can be built up according to the divine pattern. But for the moment its task is rather to provide the atmosphere in which an ecumenical sense can be developed in all the churches, whether they are directly concerned in negotiations for closer union with other churches or not.

### I.

The first and most indispensable element in this ecumenical sense is absolute honesty.

The churches must start from the point at which they are. But where are they? In the minds of all of us, there is a tendency to fashion and to cling to illusions. The first condition of progress is willingness to engage in ruthless self-criticism and in the abandonment

of all illusions. The situation of all churches is far more critical than most Christians are willing to recognise. Except in those countries which have passed through violent revolutions, the ancient framework of the Church remains, much as it has been in past centuries, and its work goes forward from day to day without very noticeable changes. The extent to which the Church has lost its hold on the life of Christendom, and to which the life of the ordinary man has been secularised may easily escape our notice, unless we are very firm in refusing to comfort ourselves with shadows, and in accepting the grim facts in all their grimness.

England is by no means the least Christian country in Christendom. Yet all reliable statistics on the religious life of the country tell the same tale of a steady decline of Christian influence on the life of the country. There is still widespread respect for Christian standards of decency and order; there is remarkably little anti-clericalism or active dislike of the Church. But all the time there is a slow shrinking of the area of the nation's life which is in any way touched by the Church. The establishment of the Church Assembly, greater care in the selection of candidates for the ministry, the longer and more thorough training given before ordination, the setting up of commissions and councils for every kind of Christian activity, new movements and new experiments in worship, are all evidences of life in the Church, and have made it probably more efficient than it has ever been since the Reformation. But none of these things, nor all together, has had any power to stay the decline. The Free Churches are, if anything, in a worse stage of ineffectiveness than the Church of England. The clergyman who complained bitterly that the leaders of the Church are putting forward great plans for the organisation of the Church in the future and forgetting that in thirty years time there will be no Church to organise was overstating his point, but he had a point and an important one to state.

In England, the only Christian body which shows marked signs of having strengthened its position is the Roman Catholic Church. Here that Church is a small, well-shepherded and remarkably well-disciplined body. In countries where Roman Catholicism is the prevailing form of the Christian religion, the condition of religious disarray seems to be not very different from that with which we are familiar in our own country. Of the European countries, that on which the most accurate information is available is France. For many years complaints of the shortage of priests have been heard from every part of France. The results are now being seen in the complete detachment from the Church of almost the whole working class, and of a proportion of the population which some authorities put as high as ninety per cent.

In the Scandinavian countries, there is still a very close connection between the Church and the life of the nation. Almost everyone is a member of the national Church. Almost every young person is confirmed, after a much more protracted and thorough course of training than it is usually possible to give in England. Yet this ecclesiastical loyalty itself does not prevent the existence of empty churches, a very thorough secularisation of life, and a disintegration of the family

perhaps even more complete than that from which we suffer in this country.

The weakness of the Church is not to be taken as an argument in favour of union. But no consideration of the problems of the Church in this century is likely to be profitable unless it starts by facing frankly, without fantasy and without pessimism, the situation as it actually is.

## II.

There is another sense in which absolute honesty is demanded of us. We must know and express accurately our own beliefs; we must have the patience to penetrate behind formulas and phrases to the beliefs by which other churches live. The barrenness of much discussion springs from the impatience which supposes that it understands, and is therefore unwilling to endure the hard discipline of a real exchange of thought. Where theological conversation takes place in such a way that those engaged in it understand—as perfectly as is possible in this world of always imperfect communication—each what the other is trying to say, the results are likely to be surprising. There are differences between the churches. To suppose that these differences are unimportant is one of those illusions which it is the business of ecumenical work to sweep away. But the differences are not always where we imagine them to be. Patient study in common not seldom shows that, where people have imagined themselves to be radically disagreeing, neither party is denying what the other affirms, nor affirming what the other denies. But with this possibility, we always have to reckon also with the contrary, that radical disagreement may be concealed by the use in common of phraseology which has never been carefully analysed.

Not long ago a correspondent pleaded in the column of the *Church Times* that evangelicals should try to understand the doctrine of the eucharistic sacrifice, and set forth exactly that doctrine of the relationship between the Holy Communion and the sacrifices of the Old Testament which I was taught in my strictly evangelical boyhood. There is a difference between the Anglo-Catholic and the Evangelical doctrine of the Eucharistic Sacrifice, but it does not lie in the place where this amiable writer imagined it to be; what he was asserting is something that no well-instructed Evangelical ever wished to deny.

For many non-Anglicans in this country, the phrase Apostolic Succession has an extremely menacing sound. It seems almost impossible for them to dissociate the words from a purely magical conception of the laying on of hands as the sole and exclusive method of the transmission of grace and authority in the Church. When they discover that many Anglicans, who greatly value the historic succession and regard it as one of the treasures with which our Church is placed in trust for the welfare of the churches generally, hold a view which is entirely unmagical and does not involve the denial of all validity to non-episcopal ministrations, they are surprised, and feel that the divergence between us is not as great as they had supposed.

But frankness may lead to the discovery of disagreement, as well as to its mitigation.

The other day, a Russian student of the Russian Theological Academy in Paris asked me suddenly in the street, "Do you accept the communion of saints?" Not wishing to be involved at that moment in an argument, I replied, "Naturally: I say the Apostles' Creed every day, and the Communion of Saints is part of the common inheritance of the Church." But my answer, though it served its purpose for the moment, was not a real answer to his question. The orthodox churches include under the term *communion of saints* much that is nowhere found in the formularies of our Church, and some things to which it might be necessary for us to object as un-Biblical.

Another interesting result of really frank ecumenical discussion is the realisation that the old lines of division within the Christian Church no longer correspond to the divisions of to-day. The differences between denominations are often less than the differences which co-exist within the same denomination. The old conflict between fundamentalism and modernism is not as bitter as it was, but it is still there. In some communions the theological conflict is now rather between neo-orthodoxy, not always easily distinguishable from fundamentalism, and "liberalism"—the word in this context being used as a term of abuse. Barthian and non-Barthian are still ranged in opposing camps. Is communism wholly of the devil, or is it redeemable by the Gospel? Has the Bible a direct message for the social and political ills of the present day, or has it not? What is to be the attitude of the Christian to the state and to politics? Is there a properly Christian attitude? These, and others, more than narrowly dogmatic issues, are those on which Christians of to-day are sharply divided. The discovery of a common Christian mind, or at least the elucidation and definition of differences, is part of the task of ecumenical study.

We may conclude this section by indicating another sphere in which ruthless honesty is necessary. A number of unions between previously separated Churches have been brought about. What has been the effect of them? We are always told that the elimination of division and the restoration of union will set free new spiritual forces, and equip the Church for its task of winning the world for Christ. Does this consequence always follow? Not long ago in Canada, I heard one minister say to another: "You now have your United Church of Canada, and that is a very good thing. But has it made your people better Christians than they were?" To this the reply was: "There you are touching on the sore spot." Further comment is unnecessary. We may look nearer home. The reunion of almost all Presbyterians in Scotland in the one national Church was an event which brought happiness to many people beyond the limits of the Scottish churches. But has the union made the Church of Scotland more efficient, more spiritually minded, more missionary-hearted than it was before? I do not know the answer; but I am sure that the answer ought not to be taken for granted.

### III.

Before we look to the future, and the tasks that lie immediately before the Churches, there are two other factors in the present situation which have to be taken into consideration.

The first is a renewal of denominational emphasis. In the course of this year and the next, probably ten or twelve world meetings of world-wide denominations will be held. The Lutherans have already met; the Presbyterians, Baptists, Methodists and others are shortly to meet. Each denomination has a right and natural sense of its own importance. But it is clear that the strengthening of denominational links on a world-wide basis is not in itself favourable to projects of local and regional unity between churches which have different allegiances in the world-wide patterns. The message of the Lutheran churches to the world in its first draft opened with the words: "The Gospel of Jesus Christ has been committed to the Lutheran churches." (I am quoting from an oral report, and not verbatim from a printed document.) Though this slightly belligerent opening was later, out of regard for the feelings of other Christian communions, rephrased in a rather different form, it is evidence of a high self-consciousness, of a sense of mission and separateness in the Lutheran churches of the world. This increase of denominational emphasis and feeling has its dangers, but is not to be regarded as necessarily inimical to the rise of real Christian ecumenicity. A genuinely Catholic Church of Christ cannot come into being unless every denomination is able to bring into the common store all the treasures which it has had in keeping during the time of separation; it cannot come by a wearing down of all denominational ruggedness into a smooth pattern of *Gleichschaltung*. Perhaps it is the very rise of ecumenical feeling that makes the denominations feel it necessary to insist upon their own sectional inheritance, lest it be lost sight of in the desire for general unification. In so far as their emphasis is merely sectarian it is uncatholic; in so far as it is stressing valuable Christian elements which are needed for the enrichment of the whole, it is performing an essential service to the cause of Christian unity.

By the time this article is in print, the inauguration of the new united Church of South India will have taken place. The achievement of this union is so great an event, and is the fulfilment of so many hopes, maintained with patience through manifold discouragements over more than a quarter of a century, that there is a tendency on the part of those who have desired the union to overlook some of the grave disadvantages under which the new church labours in its beginnings. It will not have a unified ministry. Though all ministers will technically be available for any office, it will be possible for congregations to object to some of them as not adequately ordained to meet the requirements of a particular charge. The various proposals to eliminate this duality have all been rejected; and, though the difficulty will decrease once the union is inaugurated, through the thirty years, period allowed for growing together it will remain a difficulty and a grave source of weakness. Further, since the ministry will still have within it a non-episcopal element, the terms of communion with the Church of England and other Anglican provinces for which the new church can hope are very different from those which would have been possible if the unification of ministries had been secured from the start, as was proposed by the General Council of the Church of India, Burma and Ceylon, and as has been secured in the proposed scheme

of union for the churches in Ceylon. It is to be hoped that there will be close spiritual fellowship between the Church of England and the new Church ; there will be a safeguarding of the rights of Anglicans now in the area of the South India Church. But for the rest, there will be a series of rather complicated interim arrangements ; and the question of full communion cannot come up until the end of the thirty years' period. This was made inevitable in South India by the unbending opposition of some of the non-Anglican bodies in that area to every proposal by which the duality could have been ended. This should serve as a warning to other bodies engaged in plans for union. Every effort should be made to secure that any new church when it comes into existence should have a ministry which is of equal acceptability and authority throughout the whole of its own area, and is also canonically acceptable to all the bodies from which the new church has sprung. If this requirement is not attended to, there is a danger that, by our efforts after union, we may precipitate new schisms in all parts of the world.

#### IV.

Within the space of this article, it is not possible to review the many other plans for union which have been put in hand in many parts of the world, and which are bound to be gravely affected by the success or failure of the South India experiment. It seems better to confine our attention to certain general considerations.

The major question, and one to which different answers will be given by ecumenically-minded Christians of different traditions, is as to the measure of agreement which is necessary before inter-communion or organic union can be effected. It is important to note that the Anglican Communion, by establishing relations of full communion with the Old Catholic Churches of the continent of Europe, has established a new precedent. In the agreement made between the two communions, it is expressly stated that each church retains its own identity, that *communio in sacris* does not mean that each church is committed to all the dogmatic affirmations of the other, and that there is a wide sphere in which differences can be permitted without a barrier to spiritual fellowship being involved. This principle, once accepted, has to be worked out in detail. What are the limits of divergence, beyond which unity is impossible, or if achieved, would be no more than a formal registration of agreement to differ ? Unhappily the Czecho-Slovak National Church, through the mouth of its patriarch, has recently affirmed in rather uncompromising terms its unitarian position. Any approach by that church to other churches in Czecho-Slovakia or elsewhere cannot at the present time lead to anything fruitful, since the dogmatic divisions are so deep as to make any unification impossible. But if two churches genuinely and uncompromisingly base their faith on the Nicene Creed, interpreted in the light of Holy Scripture, is anything further necessary ? Do any divergences in the theological field, outside the affirmations of the Creed, affect fundamentals of the faith, or do they belong to the region of pious opinion ? It would seem that, on the one hand, among the most potent causes of division among Christians has been the tendency of

all churches to erect into dogmas of the faith what are really matters of pious opinion only, inasmuch as they do not fall within the limits of the biblical revelation ; and on the other that disagreements in such matters ought not to be held as a bar to communion and fellowship in Church life. If this were clearly recognised, complete identity of dogmatic statement would seem to be rather a thing to be aimed at as a result of living a common life together than a pre-condition to the experiment of entering on the common life.

How far is the acceptance of a common ministry necessary to ecclesiastical fellowship ? As we have seen, there can be no adequate union, unless there is a ministry which is recognised throughout the whole of the uniting bodies as having perfect equality of status and authority. But this is to be distinguished from identity of doctrine about the ministry in every detail.

The sermon preached to the University of Cambridge by the present Archbishop of Canterbury has been widely recognised as opening a way out of the deadlock into which most negotiations for union have fallen on this very question of the ministry. Briefly, the contention of the Archbishop is that the establishment of a common ministry, and therefore of sacraments enjoyed in common, should precede attempts at organic union of churches now existing in separation. This is particularly applicable to England, where the legal difficulties of the Establishment introduce complications unknown in countries where there is no established form of Christianity or of any other religion.

The approach to a commonly recognised ministry can be made honestly along the lines of one theological understanding of the situation. If all the parties to negotiations are concerned to maintain the eminence and perfection of the ministry which they have exercised, and are unwilling to admit that they have anything to receive from others, there can be no approach to unity except by the recognition of the validity and adequacy of all ministries as they now stand. This rules out unity between episcopal and non-episcopal communions, unless the episcopal are prepared to admit—what certainly the Orthodox and Old Catholics (to name two bodies only) would not be prepared to admit—that episcopacy is no more than an historical accident without doctrinal significance. If, however, all parties are prepared to make the approach on the basis of universal defect, on the recognition, that is, that since the Church is in fact divided, no ministry comes up to the expectation and purpose of the Lord of the Church who has willed that His Church should be one, the situation is entirely changed. It is then open to every communion to hold honestly and passionately that there has been committed to it a gift which it must not deny and which it regards as indispensable to the fulness of the Church; but at the same time to recognise, without an artificial humility, that it does not itself possess all the fulness of the riches of the Church, and that there are gifts and graces which it still needs and which it may expect to receive from God, in answer to the new obedience which would be involved in seeking in a new way the oneness which is according to His will. It can be left to God to determine in what the defects of each body consist, and what it would be His pleasure to

bestow on those who seek to glorify Him by restoring in a measure the unity of the divided Church.

Negotiations between the Church of England and the Free Churches along the lines of the Archbishop's sermon have been begun, but are as yet at much too early a stage to be commented on in detail. But it may be pointed out that, if the principle suggested by the Archbishop is accepted, what he has proposed would be applicable in other countries as well as in England, and that this further application of the proposals might help to remove certain serious difficulties. In view of all the history of the past, it would be very difficult indeed for the English Free Churches to accept episcopacy from the Church of England alone. If the recovery of a common ministry were part of a larger movement, in which other episcopal churches, such as that of Sweden, were involved, the difficulty might be less acutely felt. In the same way, it is paradoxical that both the Church of England and the Church of Norway are in communion with the Church of Sweden, but are not in communion with one another. The Norwegian Church is rightly proud of its great traditions and history, and does not regard itself in an inferior position because, by a sheer accident of history, the episcopal succession was preserved in Sweden and not in Norway. It would be impossible for the Norwegian Church to consider recovering the lost succession either from England or from Sweden, if it had to be done in such a way as even to seem to deny the working of God through the ministry and the sacraments which have been recognised in that Church for more than four centuries. But if the restoration of the historic episcopate was part of a wide movement for the recovery of fellowship, on the basis of an honest recognition of the goods and graces that all have retained in separation, it is possible that difficulties which are now acutely felt might lose some of their power to stand in the way of reconciliation. It must not be imagined that a scheme such as is here indicated has reached even the stage of preliminary discussion; what is here written is no more than an indication of the direction in which the minds of many Christians deeply concerned about our divisions are beginning to move.

## V.

The progress of the movement towards Christian unity cannot be measured entirely by negotiations actually set on foot and the success which they have attained in bringing the churches together. What can only be called a process of ecumenical education has been initiated, and, though its results are not tangible or easily measurable, it is beginning to affect the attitude of leading Christians in many churches to the problem of unity, and indeed to the doctrine of the Church. One of the members of the commission which recently visited the Orthodox Churches of the Near East on behalf of the World Council of Churches told me that the difference in attitude between Orthodox prelates who had had some contact with the ecumenical movement and those who had not was so marked as to be almost startling. Whereas one group was apparently willing to continue in the attitudes and atmospheres of the fourth century, the other, though still devotedly attached to the Orthodox tradition, had become aware that the

Orthodox Churches cannot fulfil their mission unless they regard themselves as in some way responsible for making the treasures of their church life available as something in which it is the will of God that all His people should share. No one who has attended any of the great ecumenical gatherings, unless he happens to be a person of singular unresponsiveness to the movements of the Spirit, can continue afterwards to be exactly what he was before. New perspectives open out ; the observer becomes aware of spiritual traditions hitherto unfamiliar, and of the reality of spiritual life in churches previously dismissed as unimportant, because they do not possess some of those marks of catholicity which he himself supremely values.

It cannot be denied that there are drawbacks as well as advantages in this process of ecumenical education. The thing which above all others has to be avoided is the creation of an ecumenical bureaucracy, an internationally minded leadership in churches which themselves are untouched by the spirit of the world-wide Church. In all movements towards union, the final problem is that of bringing the influence of new thoughts and purposes to bear on ordinary church people in the parishes ; for it is, in the last resort, by them and not by prelates and great leaders that the Church lives. If they are indifferent or hostile, no movement towards union, however skilfully directed from above, can bring about that oneness of heart and spirit by which new life and power are released.

How is the ecumenical spirit to be brought into the parishes ? This is the question to which no easy answer can be given. But even here, there are beginnings which are worthy of note. Just after Easter this year, a group of young people from a working-class parish in Bristol went over to Zurich to stay as the guests of members of the Old Catholic Church in that city. It is hoped that later young people from Zurich will return the visit, and will stay in the homes of their friends in Bristol. This seems to be something new. Perhaps it indicates a line of experiment by which the sometimes academic discussions of the leaders in the Christian world can be brought down to earth, and tested out on the level of the ordinary day-to-day life of the churches.

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#### CONTEMPORARY COMMENTARY—(concluded from page 140).

It is easy to retort that the doctrine of justification which is in mind as a mere caricature, but there is ardent need for a fresh and profound study of the significance of justification both for faith and for theology. Such a study must come from evangelical sources. Is there any possibility of its appearance ? The plea for a recovery of wholeness which the report presents will find many an echo in the minds of those who are aware of the extent to which modern evangelicalism has departed from its authentic tradition. But it is important to remember that most pleas of this sort argue for the recovery of something which has never existed. Primitive wholeness was subject to many limitations and we do not find here a sufficient recognition that wholeness is bound up with eschatology and can only be known proleptically in this present age. It is unlikely that there will ever be agreement about the meaning of primitive wholeness (as recent discussion of apostolic ministry will show) and there is a real danger of the concept being used as a theological dug-out to obstruct creative action in the present age.