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The Church of England, the Free Churches, and Episcopacy

BY CYRIL BOWLES

CHRISTIANS in England have been challenged, as has the whole of Christendom, by the ideal of Christian unity outlined by the Assembly of the World Council of Churches at New Delhi in 1962, the larger part of which runs thus : " We believe that the unity which is both God's will and His gift to His Church is being made visible as all in each place who are baptized into Jesus Christ and confess him as Lord and Saviour are brought by the Holy Spirit into one fully committed fellowship, holding the one apostolic faith, preaching the one Gospel, breaking the one bread, joining in common prayer, and having a corporate life reaching out in witness and service to all ". Such a unity must include Roman Catholics. The healing of the breach between them and other Christians is now treated as possible with a confidence unjustified at any previous period. Those Protestants most knowledgeable about Rome have for long been aware of the vigorous reforming tendencies which have been brought to more public attention in the Vatican Council, and Archbishop Fisher's visit to Pope John XXIII released a widespread goodwill and longing for fuller understanding and fellowship on both sides of the divide which had been forming for some time but had not been expressed. Encouraged by these developments, members of the Church of England must, with prayer, effort, and hope, seek to find God's way towards union with Rome however far distant a prospect it may seem, but the reaching out for completer fellowship in this direction ought not to hinder our attempts to realize the New Delhi ideal of visible unity with the other Reformed churches in England. If this ideal is God's will, then we must be obedient to Him wherever and whenever we can be. Every step of obedience leads on to others and God can be trusted to complete His design for the unity in love of all His people.

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The changes which have taken place in the relationships between the Church of England and the English Free Churches in the last fifty years have been spectacular. At the beginning of this century the civil and religious disabilities of nonconformists had not long been removed and there was a legacy of bitterness on their part alongside a continuing Anglican superiority, but there burst into the English situation some unexpected, recreative forces from the World Missionary Conference which was held in Edinburgh in 1910. It could not be claimed that organic unity was an urgent necessity in Britain as speakers from overseas declared it to be in their countries, but, when God's will for the Church in other countries was so apparent, it was impossible for those who sent missionaries to them not to question

their complacency about their own denominational divisions which they had exported.

The Lambeth Conference of 1920 took striking initiative in turning the stirrings of repentance into the beginnings of amendment. Its "Appeal to all Christian People" is striking for the wideness of its vision and the generosity of its spirit. Even those with the longest memories of Anglican domination and superiority could begin to forgive and forget the past when the bishops spoke of a unity in which "Christian Communions now separated from one another would retain much that has long been distinctive in their methods of worship and service. It is through a rich diversity of life and devotion that the unity of the whole fellowship will be fulfilled". Visible unity does not mean uniformity.

The Free Church leaders warmed to this appeal and a series of conferences was held from 1921 to 1925 between representatives of the Church of England and the Free Church Federal Council. Important agreements were reached and joint statements were issued expressing them, but the Anglican representatives made a separate declaration about non-episcopal ministries which exposed the difference of opinion which has been and remains the principal stumbling-block in the way of the achievement of organic unity on the part of the Church of England and the Free Churches. The representatives did not say that non-episcopal ministries are valid; they refused to regard them as invalid; they expressed the wish that the use of both terms should be abandoned and then declared that "ministries which imply a sincere intention to preach Christ's Word and administer the Sacraments as Christ has ordained, and to which authority so to do has been solemnly given by the church concerned, are real ministries of Christ's Word and Sacraments in the Universal Church. Yet ministries, even when so regarded, may be in varying degrees irregular or defective" (G. K. A. Bell, *Documents on Christian Unity, 1920-24*, pp. 158, 159). This statement, while seeming to give magnanimous acceptance of the English non-episcopal ministries, has been variously interpreted and has failed to provide a basis of general intercommunion or a way towards reunion. Many Anglicans cannot understand what more should be required than that the non-episcopal ministries should be real, whereas others seem to regard this admission as of little importance compared with their conviction that these ministries are irregular or defective.

The crux of the matter is the attitude of Anglicans towards episcopal ordination. The Lambeth Conference of 1920, having stated its conviction that "the visible unity of the Church will be found to involve the whole-hearted acceptance" of the Holy Scriptures, the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds, and the sacraments of Baptism and the Holy Communion, added as a further requirement "a ministry acknowledged by every part of the Church as possessing not only the inward call of the Spirit, but also the commission of Christ and the authority of the whole body". This was not to say that episcopacy in its traditional form is essential to the existence of the Church, but the bishops immediately went on to say: "May we not reasonably claim that the episcopate is the one means of providing such a ministry?"

Then, having acknowledged "the spiritual reality" of the ministries of the non-episcopal Communion, they concluded by saying: "We would urge that (the episcopate) is now and will prove to be in future the best instrument for maintaining the unity and continuity of the Church" (*Lambeth Conference Report, 1920, p. 28*).

Even when this view is accepted the further practical question, which also has theological importance, arises, namely: How can episcopal and non-episcopal denominations be brought together? The bishops offered, as a way towards the full acceptance of all ministries by all involved in any scheme of union, to receive whatever form of commission or recognition the authorities of the other negotiating bodies might ask for, and then expressed the hope that ministers who have not received it would likewise "accept a commission through episcopal ordination, as obtaining for them a ministry throughout the whole fellowship" (*Op. cit.*, p. 29). In spite of the fact that the bishops added the words, "in so acting no one of us could possibly be taken to repudiate his past ministry", this proposal appears not to have commended itself as a fruitful basis of negotiation. This may have been largely due to the influence of events in South India where the negotiating bodies, having begun to produce a scheme of union along the lines of the bishops' suggestion, abandoned it in favour of another whereby all who had already been ordained through prayer and the laying on of hands as ministers of the Word and Sacraments in the existing denominations would be accepted as ministers of the united Church, with the proviso that all ordinations after the union should be episcopal. The same method of integration of ministries was proposed in two documents, *A Sketch of a United Church* (1936) and *Outline of a Reunion Scheme for the Church of England and the Evangelical Free Churches of England* (1938), produced by Anglican and Free Church representatives who held discussions following the Lambeth Conference of 1930. It is most unfortunate that, because of the outbreak of war in 1939 and alarm at the possibly disrupting consequences in the Anglican Communion of the inauguration of the Church of South India, these proposals were never properly discussed.

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Archbishop Fisher initiated an entirely different approach to the problem in his famous Cambridge Sermon of 1946, *A Step Forward in Church Relations*. In this sermon he gave two reasons why in his judgment it would not be satisfactory to try to produce a constitutional scheme of reunion, such as the South India scheme is, in England. The first was the excessively complicated administrative task which would be involved in altering the very involved constitution of the Church of England to make possible its assimilation with the constitutions of the other denominations which would at the same time require alteration. This is certainly a cogent reason for having a preliminary stage of full intercommunion in which the denominations could grow in unity and slowly reform their constitutions as a way towards organic unity. The Archbishop's second reason was that the Church of England is the nodal point of the Anglican Communion and must not therefore confuse its own identity lest the whole Communion should be

disrupted. This argument has now much less force than it had in 1946, because since that date the Church of England has ceased to be *primus inter pares*—the documents which have come out of the Toronto Congress make this plain—and movements towards organic unity with non-episcopal denominations have gathered force in many of the Church of England's sister churches. Their extent and significance can be clearly seen in David Paton's *Anglicans and Unity* (1962).

While these developments have been taking place, the Lambeth Conferences of 1948 and 1958 have virtually said of the Church of South India what Archbishop Davidson is alleged to have said of the intercommunion at the Kikuyu Conference of 1913: "This is eminently well-pleasing to Almighty God, but it must not happen again", and all Anglican negotiators have altered the existing schemes in which they have been involved or begun new ones so as to secure, unlike the Church of South India, a complete integration of ministries from the beginning of any union. In England discussions have followed up Archbishop Fisher's suggestion that the Free Churches should take episcopacy into their systems in such a way as to secure a period of full intercommunion. First, joint discussions were held between representatives of the Church of England and all the Evangelical Free Churches. The result was a report *Church Relations in England*, published in 1950. After this negotiations were carried on between the Church of England and the Methodist Church. These have resulted in an interim statement published in 1958 and a report containing proposals, published this year with the title *Conversations between the Church of England and the Methodist Church*.

This document, produced by people who show in it that they have the desire and the will to take decisive steps towards the achievement of organic unity in England, is one to be welcomed and, because it is of such great significance, carefully examined. It repeats, but in a fresh way and with fuller discussion of certain points at issue, what previous joint reports have said about the wide extent of doctrinal agreement that exists between the Church of England and the Free Churches, and in this instance the Methodist Church in particular, and suggests that in spite of differences which remain, including those about the interpretation of the historic episcopate, there is ample enough agreement over the essentials of Christian faith to justify full intercommunion as the first stage on which organic unity will follow as the second. Only an Anglican who wished to make the Thirty-Nine Articles or some other precise doctrinal requirements of his own a condition of interdenominational *reapprochemen* would want to dissent from these proposals on general, doctrinal grounds.

The difficulties that arise because of differences of conviction about the historic episcopate are overcome by what is in effect a return to the proposal of the Lambeth Conference of 1920 although the signatories of the majority report do not say, as the bishops in 1920 did say, that they are asking Methodist ministers "to accept a commission through episcopal ordination". There is, however, a service of reconciliation in which after prayer a bishop of the Church of England lays his hands in silence on the head of each Methodist minister present and then a Methodist minister after prayer lays his hands on the bishop and all the

Anglican priests present. The service provides for the reception through prayer, firstly, of representative members of the Methodist Church by the bishop and, secondly, of representative members of the Church of England by the presiding Methodist minister. This rite is designed to secure that part of the ideal of Christian unity described by the New Delhi Assembly but not quoted at the beginning of this article, namely, that each group of baptized Christian believers should be "united with the whole Christian fellowship in all places and all ages in such wise that ministry and members are accepted by all". In many respects this rite is superbly constructed and it gives fine expression to mutual acceptance, so far as may be, of each church by the other and of entire dependence on God for the gift of unity as of every other gift.

One problem in this service arises over the interpretation of what is supposed to be conveyed through the laying on of hands. The bishop's prayer over the Methodist ministers which, presumably, expresses the intention of the action which follows, includes the petition that each may be endued "according to his need with grace for the office of priest in the Church of God", not, be it noted, in the Church of England, though the imperative formula which follows the laying-on of hands is concerned with authority to exercise the office in the Church of England. The phraseology used by the presiding Methodist minister is almost precisely parallel but the significant title is minister. It would appear from this that on Methodist ministers ministerial priesthood in the Church of God is being conveyed for the first time and on Anglican priests some particular form of ministry, for we do not seek to rectify the inadequacies in the exercise of our ministry by a rite which could easily be misinterpreted as ordination. As for the Methodists, if we take together what is said on page 23 about priesthood and on page 50 about the Methodists' understanding of their ministry, it is plain that Methodist ministers have a ministerial priesthood by virtue of their ordination and exercise it even although they are not described as priests. This rite encourages a misunderstanding of ministerial priesthood even if it can be argued, as the compilers of it would doubtless argue, that it is not conveying ordination either to priesthood or ministry.

It is the laying on of episcopal hands which, because of past discussions and what is believed about it by some members of the Church of England, raises queries about what is intended and about the necessity and desirability of this rite. The trouble is that the report is scarcely ever explicit whether it is speaking of the historic episcopate, with all the value this can provide in pastoral oversight of the Church, or of episcopal ordination. It looks as though the first is being spoken of, but the reader, before he knows where he is, is being told something about the latter. The Declaration of Intention at the beginning of the service mentions a few of the characteristics of the Methodist tradition in which Anglicans may come through this integration to share. The previous paragraph speaks thus of only one element of the Anglican tradition: "We of the Church of England have been accustomed . . . to seek God's grace and authority for our bishops, priests, and deacons through prayer and laying on of the hands of bishops. . . . We wish to

share this precious gift, which we unworthily have received, with the ministers of the Methodist Church . . ." (p. 38). The only occasion when God's grace and authority are sought through the laying on of hands of bishops is in ordination. At other times grace and authority are sought in other ways, so that the obvious meaning of this passage is that it is episcopal ordination which is being conveyed. There is no reference to any values of the historic episcopate except this, but the Church of South India has entered into them without this question-begging rite.

Another example of the obscurity and ambiguity of this report in its approach to episcopacy is to be found in the discussion of the subject itself. On page 25 occurs the question: "Can we, therefore, contemplate any method, other than episcopal ordination, by which a ministry, unquestioned and accepted by all, can be secured?" On the following page we have a further question: "Can Methodists accept episcopacy as a means to unify the ministries and to secure their equal recognition and authority in the united Church to be?" What meaning can episcopacy have here except episcopal ordination? There is no suggestion here, as in South India, of including episcopacy and episcopal ordination in the constitution of the united Church while accepting non-episcopal ministries as they are in the interim period. The laying on of bishops' hands is here accepted as essential to an integration which will permit full intercommunion.

That this interpretation both of the rite of unification and of the statements in the report about this method of integration is the correct one is borne out by the policy that the Church of England will be involved in following after the rite has been administered. "The ministers of each Church would be eligible to celebrate or preach in the other Church," it is said in the footnote on page 10. So far as this concerns Methodist ministers conducting services of Holy Communion in Anglican churches it must mean, unless the preface to the Ordinal is to be abrogated, that Methodist ministers have received episcopal ordination through this rite. This is more than a matter of allowing such Anglicans as are so disposed to interpret it as episcopal ordination; the Church of England, if it accepts these proposals, will be endorsing this interpretation. This confirms the view of the four Methodists who signed the minority report that "it is impossible to doubt that whatever else the rite implies it confers episcopal ordination" (p. 60). To imply this and to say at the same time that this is not what we are doing is dishonest.

An important point, so long as the Church of England uses lawyers in deciding which men have been episcopally ordained or not, is whether diocesan registrars will regard this rite as conveying episcopal ordination as the preface to the ordinal requires. It is vital, if the scheme is to be carried out, that their views should be ascertained beforehand, because it would be a shocking piece of bad faith if Methodists were to have this rite administered to them and then be told that they could not after all celebrate the Holy Communion in Anglican churches. No assurance has been forthcoming about the attitude of our ecclesiastical lawyers, but it is no use our pretending that their views can be ignored.

This scheme of integrating the ministry of the Methodist Church with that of the Church of England has been produced to satisfy those who hold to Tractarian views of episcopacy and it is essential that their convictions should be respected and that no pressure should be put on them to go against their consciences as we move along the road to organic unity. It is sometimes forgotten that there are others who wish also to be conscientious and who hold to beliefs about episcopacy and ordination which were the most widespread in the Church of England before the Oxford Movement. They wish to have the historic episcopate in any united church, they hold that in an episcopal church ordination should invariably be performed by a bishop, but they cannot endorse an outlook which holds that bishops in the historic succession are essential to the existence of the Church and that ordination by such bishops is necessary to ministering with God's grace and full authority. Those who adopt this standpoint believe that the Anglican statement made in the discussions following the Lambeth Conference of 1920 that the ministries of the Evangelical Free Churches are "real ministries of Christ's Word and Sacraments in the Universal Church" should be taken at its face value and acted upon. They would not want this to be taken to imply a justification of indiscriminate intercommunion, but they are bound to hold that on certain occasions intercommunion should be reciprocal. For those who look at the situation in this way, the service of reconciliation is not only unnecessary but a denial in action, if not by word, of the grace and authority given by God to Methodist ministers through their ordination and in other ways. A reading of this Anglican-Methodist report, of other joint reports, and of certain Anglican documents, such as the report of the Lambeth Conference of 1958, would suggest that views such as those outlined in this paragraph are not held in the Church of England. There can be no Anglican advance in fellowship until they are treated with the same respect as Tractarian ones.

The main problem for the Church of England in the quest for reunion is to find a way which does justice both to those who think along Tractarian lines and to those who do not. The only scheme which has come anywhere near doing so is the one which was followed in South India. Such an approach was rejected for the future by the Lambeth Conferences of 1948 and 1958, but to many who were not members of those Conferences the decision seems quite arbitrary. As an immediate scheme for reunion in England it would require too much of an administrative revolution, but what has still to be explored is the possibility of establishing on its principles a scheme of full intercommunion. It would be slower and less tidy, it would demand a patient acceptance of the principles and prejudices of others, but it would have the superlative advantages of doing justice to the convictions of all, Anglicans, Methodists, and others involved in it, and be patently honest and above suspicion of subterfuge.

That some other way than the one which is at present before us should be opened up is necessary if we are to have intercommunion with the Methodist Church and not simply with part of it. We ought not to ignore the minority report, however intemperately its ideas are expressed, for it is provoked by Anglican views and claims. Nor

should we fail to take into account the effect of such a scheme of intercommunion as this on the other Free Churches and their future relationships with us and the Methodists. It is sometimes urged in extenuation of the ambiguities of this scheme that the Methodist Church will "be free to preserve the relations of intercommunion and fellowship with other non-episcopal churches which it now enjoys". This may well be possible in the stage of intercommunion, but what will happen when organic unity is achieved? The doctrine which demands that before full intercommunion between two churches can be permissible there must be an episcopal laying of hands on those who have not been episcopally ordained must oppose any degree of intercommunion with non-episcopal churches. The Methodists should be clear that they can only be given a temporary guarantee of the continuance of their present relationships. Also, once this proposed basis of intercommunion is established, every other measure of intercommunion, even the meagre provisions of the resolutions of the houses of bishops in Convocation in 1933, is laid open to damaging challenge.

The doubtfulness of this assurance that has been given to the Methodists is a further example of the closeness to dishonesty in which this scheme moves. A further danger of something other than honesty lies in the carrying out of the rite of unification itself. Its presupposition is that there is something defective in the ministries of both churches because of their present separation and that whatever is defective must be put right before there can be mutual acceptance. How many of the bishops and other clergymen of the Church of England believe this doctrine that they who have been ordained to their particular ministry in the Church of God have a ministry which is, nevertheless, defective? If they do not believe this it will be deliberate dishonesty to take part in a rite which has this view as its *raison d'être* and is praying that such defects as there are may be rectified through it. A lack of integrity on the part of those to whom this rite is administered would be a false and dangerous way of initiating a union of churches.

In all our discussions about the practicalities of approaches to intercommunion and reunion we Anglicans cause grave difficulties because we are not clear what are the values of the historic episcopate that we are seeking to commend. The symbolic value is clear enough and the opportunity given of fatherly, pastoral care, but so often our apologists go on to speak in terms which suggest that some mystique belongs to the episcopal office as such, ignoring the *episcopē* possessed by other officers in the Church. It is not without importance that no attempt is made to relate in the report we have been considering the statements about the *episcopē* which Methodism has in a corporate form (page 26) to episcopacy in the Church of England and episcopal ordination. It is significant that the report *Relations between Anglican and Presbyterian Churches* (1957) which essayed a re-examination of the idea of episcopacy was received in England with an indifference approaching disdain. If it is the case that ministers other than bishops have *episcopē*, does it not follow that in some sense they confer episcopal ordination? This is only one of a number of issues that requires attention if the report *Conversations between the Church of England and the Methodist Church* is to be properly assessed and progress made towards organic unity.