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

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

Except they be agreed

BY GRAHAM LEONARD

IT is with sadness that I find myself obliged to write critically of the Scheme as put forward by the Commission. It is the duty of every Christian to pray and work for the bringing about of the visible unity of Christendom. It will, therefore, be a matter of disappointment and distress if he finds that he cannot, in good conscience, endorse specific proposals for reunion between separated Churches. He will examine his own disquiet most carefully with prayer and penitence lest he should be allowing prejudices or misunderstandings to be exalted into matters of principle. He will read with care and understanding the comments of those who commend the proposals. If, however, after he has done so, he is still unable to agree to them without violating his conscience, he can do none other than make his disquiet known. Such disquiet may spring simply from an inability to agree to a particular aspect of the proposals. It may also spring from a conviction that certain fundamental truths are being overlooked or even denied, and that if he were to agree to the proposals, he would be failing to bear witness to these truths. Both reasons lead to my own inability to support the Scheme.

One of the underlying assumptions behind the Report seems to be that unity is the one thing needed to meet our present problems, and that it must be achieved whatever the cost. In paragraph 10 it is stated, without evidence, that 'few will doubt that one cause of the continued decline in the influence and numerical strength of the Churches of this country is their disunity'. Many would, I believe, question this statement and say that one of the chief causes is the failure of the Churches to proclaim the Gospel clearly, boldly and intelligibly. The same section attributes the decline in the number of candidates for the ministry to disunity. Many would regard this as much more due to the hesitant way in which the purpose and demands of the ministry are put and the constant airing of doubts about its very necessity. If this be the case, the attaining of visible unity will not solve the problems unless that unity is firmly based upon revealed truth. In paragraph 11 it is stated that groups of younger Christians are beginning to feel that the prolonged discussions of the problem of unity are irrelevant to their concerns and are proposing to strike out independent of the Churches. That they should feel in this way does not necessarily mean that they are right to do so. It may be that their attitude is another expression of the rejection of objective truth apparent in other spheres, and the substitution of the immediate needs of man, as seen by himself, as the only criterion for determining what is right. If that be the case, it is the Church's duty to proclaim that truth is of God and that we must obey it.

Unity itself, in the sense of an organisational merger of two Churches, could witness to a number of things. It could witness to an un-Christian acceptance of expediency. It could witness to our ability to compromise and to our failure to look for the truth. It could witness to the power of a controlling group to enforce some form of amalgamation.

In John 17, however, we are taught that our unity must witness to the authority of Christ who is the truth, and to our obedience to him. 'I pray for them . . . that they may be one in us; that the world may believe *that thou has sent Me.*' The Report, when quoting this verse, omits the words in italics (as, alas, is so often the case). They make it clear that our unity must witness to the truth revealed in Christ. John 17 also makes it clear that our unity must proceed from our sanctification through the sanctification of our Lord. Our holiness demands our willingness to die to live—to die to sin and error and to live in holiness and truth. The problem, of course, is to discern what we should die to and what we should preserve. Our understanding of the truth revealed in Christ is partial—we see through a glass darkly—but while seeking always to live under judgment, we dare not discard, or treat lightly, such understanding as we have which we believe to be of Christ. As Bishop Stephen Neill has said, 'Christian Churches, like Christian individuals, if they desire to follow their Master, must be prepared to die for His sake; but it may be incumbent on them, as on their Master, at certain moments to say, 'My time is not yet come'. Church, like nations, are precious things; and though a Church should not 'strive officiously to keep alive' things that in the providence of God were better dead, it has no right gratuitously to sell its life away, without any assurance that the sacrifice has been worth while. Churches cannot enter into union with one another except by dying to their existence as separate Churches; they ought not to do so, unless they are assured that God himself is calling them to death with a view to a better resurrection.' We cannot decide the issue which he poses unless we are concerned with theological seriousness and integrity.

I believe that the Report exhibits what the dissentients in the 1968 Report called in the 1963 Report 'doctrinal levity'. I believe passionately that it does matter what a man believes and that the beliefs of men and nations ultimately determine their destiny. The Report tells us that those who have genuine reservations will feel, nevertheless, because of the extreme urgency of the Church's present situation, it must have their support. I do not believe that action which does not stem from a conviction that is based on what is believed to be true, will, in the long run, relieve the Church's situation.

I do not believe that an unwillingness to face the real issues involved can be overcome by the use of ambiguous terminology. I believe that the Commission has failed to distinguish between a lack of definition, which may be morally and theologically proper, and the use of ambiguity to cloak differences, which would, otherwise known, be unresolved. The latter seems to me to be morally indefensible. To take an example, whatever historical arguments may be adduced to justify the use of the word 'presbyter', the fact remains that 'priest' is used to indicate an understanding of the nature and function of the

priesthood, which is not, in common speech, understood to be expressed by 'presbyter'. If the doctrine of the ministry, as set out in the Ordinal is accepted, there would seem to be no reason why 'priest' should not be retained as the word commonly used to accept that doctrine. If the word 'priest' is rejected, one is morally entitled to ask if the doctrine is accepted or not, particularly when the use of the word 'presbyter' is to be adopted at the same time as a pledge is to be given for communion at Stage 2 with non-episcopal Churches. Much is made in the Report of growing together in understanding in Stage 2. It may seem to be lacking in faith to question this, but I do not think so in view of the use of ambiguity to obscure differences now and the failure of the Commission to make any attempt to discern where the truth is to be found in the various interpretations which are set side by side. Pious assertions about the future must be judged in the light of the willingness to tackle problems now. In the case of the pledge to be given for Stage 2, the situation is even more serious. The Dean of Carlisle has put the issue very clearly in his speech to the Convocation of York on May 15, and I must quote him at length. 'But when, in 1958, a plan of organic union was adopted, and approved by Convocation and by the Lambeth Conference, the question of maintaining at Stage 2, by the United Church, full communion, involving intercelebration with non-episcopal Churches, posed new problems. The Methodist Church, in 1967, reiterated its demand and extended it to cover Stage 2. We are on the horns of a dilemma here. On the one side, we have the Methodist demand and, on the other side, the principle of the Church of England, as seen in the Ordinal and repeated in draft Canon C.1, 'that no man shall be accounted or taken to be a lawful bishop, priest or deacon in the Church of England, or suffered to execute any of the said offices, except he be called, tried, examined and admitted thereunto according to the Ordinal or any form of service alternative thereto ordered by lawful authority, or has had formerly episcopal consecration or ordination in some Church whose Orders are recognised by the Church of England'. It cannot be too clearly stated that this is the principle of the Church of England. It is not the fad, as is sometimes suggested, of a few extremists; but it is firmly embodied in the Book of Common Prayer, and the Ordinal, which we have all sworn to be in our opinion agreeable to the Word of God. It is as firmly held by us, as the Methodist principle of maintaining full communion with non-episcopal Churches is held by them; and these two principles, as they stand, are contradictory. How, then, are we to proceed, bearing in mind that the two Churches at Stage 2 will become one? . . . What, then, do the rest of the Commission propose? We propose that we should enter Stage 1, respecting each other's principles on both sides, and carrying with us the burden of this unresolved dilemma. We believe that *if* God wants us to enter Stage 1, he will thereafter show us the way.'

If we are to go forward with an unresolved dilemma, we must ask why a pledge is to be given for one side only. Why should not both Churches also pledge themselves to maintain the position of the Church of England? After all, the Joint Committee of the Convocations, in the report of 1955 said that 'for the purpose of intercom-

munion there must be the same liberty *and limitation* of interpretation of the nature of episcopacy and priesthood as the formularies *and practice* of the Church of England allow alike in positive statement and in absence of precise definition' (my italics). (It is significant that no reference has been made to the words in italics since this statement was quoted in the 1963 Report.) If we are only giving a pledge on one side, there is no real dilemma. The issue is being resolved at Stage 1 and the Service of Reconciliation in its ministerial aspect becomes unnecessary.

But the statement that '*if* God wants us to enter Stage 1, he will thereafter show us the way', is most extraordinary. We commonly say that if an act is to be seen to be God's will, he will show us the way. But that is when the way is seen before the act is taken. Such cannot be the case here as the way relates to a situation which will arise after the act has been taken. Presumably what the Dean means is that if we decide that Stage 1 is God's will, then the way to implement the pledge will be seen at a later date. But the pledge itself is part of Stage 1, and a decision on the rightness of the pledge must be taken now. If it is decided to be right for Stage 1, then why should it not be implemented then? If it is not right to implement it now, how can it be right to give it in anticipation for Stage 2. The answer seems clear, yet would seem to reflect an extraordinary naivety on the part of the Commission. They recognise that there are Anglicans who want to stand by the Anglican formularies and practice, and therefore the pledge can be implemented now, but they think that the theological climate will have changed by the time Stage 2 has been implemented, and therefore ask us to accept it in anticipation now.

I find the Service of Reconciliation particularly unsatisfactory, and for three reasons. First, because of its confusion between the reconciliation of Churches and the unification of the ministry. It assumes that the only point of difference lies in the question of ordination. But the question of ordination reflects other issues such as Scripture and Tradition, the nature of the Church and the Priesthood, which are left unresolved. Ordination becomes isolated and simply a kind of validating act. This, to me, borders on the magical, especially when we are not allowed to call it ordination.

Secondly, because it involves contradiction between formularies and worship. At the beginning of the section entitled 'The Beginning of the Integration of the Ministries' reference is made to the threefold ministry of Bishops, Priests and Deacons which the Church of England has been careful to preserve. In the new Ordinal and its Preface, it is stated that the intention is to continue this threefold ministry. The present formularies of the Church of England, however, make it clear that it believes that episcopal ordination is necessary to perpetuate this ministry and this belief is unequivocally expressed in the revised Canons, now awaiting promulgation. It is proposed to append certain of these Canons to the Ordinal. A loyal Anglican who takes part in the Service of Reconciliation has to assent to the Canons which require episcopal ordination, yet in his act of worship, he has to profess agnosticism regarding its necessity, and he is not allowed to call the Service an ordination. Belief and worship should be complementary and not contradictory. It may be argued that a man who takes part

in the Service may privately believe it to be an ordination, but this does not alter the fact that there is a contradiction between the formal declaration of the Church with regard to doctrine and the intention with which it performs an act of worship.

Thirdly, because it assumes that if we devise an ambiguous way of dealing with our difficulties, we can assume that God will provide what is necessary to overcome our unwillingness to resolve the issue.

I believe that the reconciliation of the Churches should be expressed in an unambiguous service in which the theological and moral issues are clearly set and resolved. The unification of the ministries should be dealt with in a separate service. I believe that if the Preface to the new Ordinal is accepted as expressing the mind of the two Churches about the ministry, the proper and honest way to achieve this is by receiving each minister into the other Church in the way that is done at present when ministers transfer.

The proposals relating to episcopacy seem to me to be open to question. Any Anglican would, I hope, be concerned to ensure as far as possible that the true pattern of episcopacy was being commended and that the circumstances in which it was being received were such as to encourage its proper exercise. It is, for this reason, that I think it proper for an Anglican to comment on chapter 5—Methodist Bishops. A further reason is that in the Church of England there seems to be a tendency as, for example, in the Report *Partners in Ministry* to reduce bishops to the status of chairmen, depriving them of the opportunity to exercise their responsibility and to lead. In para. 116 the five elements of Episcopacy are set out. They are described as constituting the essential 'norm' from which most Anglicans believe they 'ought not to and cannot depart'. The first statement speaks of the episcopate as not only symbolising but *securing* the apostolic mission and authority within the Church. The second speaks of the function of the episcopate to guard the Church against erroneous teaching. It is, however, made perfectly clear that the ultimate authority in the Methodist Church both with regard to ordination and the maintenance of apostolic truth is the Conference. Some of the phrases used recently by Methodists to describe the claims which decisions of the Conference have upon individuals astonish Anglican ears, and would seem to be more appropriately used of the pre-Vatican 2 era in the Roman Catholic Church.

How are the functions of Methodist bishops to be related to the over-ruling authority of the Conference? The situation is no less obscure with regard to pastoral care. I agree that *episcopate* need not be exercised territorially, but it cannot be exercised *in vacuo*. If a Methodist presbyter is consecrated to the episcopate for his year as President, how is he to exercise his *episcopate* after his year of office has ended. If Chairmen of Districts are to be consecrated bishops, how are they to exercise their *episcopate*, when the ultimate authority for the ordination and pastoral care of the presbyters in their districts, does not lie within the district of which they are the chief pastor.

It would be easy to point to anomalies in the Church of England as at present constituted, but their present existence is no reason in itself for them to be perpetuated in the United Church. Throughout

the Report there is a tendency when difficult issues arise to justify an unwillingness to resolve them, by appealing to the fact that they already exist unresolved in one or other of the present Churches, usually the Church of England. This is an unworthy argument. A movement towards reunion should be used as the opportunity to seek to resolve such issues and remove what is of error in doctrine or practice.

I have, in this brief article, confined my comments very largely to the failure of the Commission to take the theological issues seriously and to its use of ambiguity. I shall, elsewhere, be publishing comment on the theological issues involved. Here it must suffice to say that I believe that Catholic-minded Anglicans are concerned to maintain certain beliefs or practice relating to such matters as priesthood, Scripture and Tradition, revelation, the relationship of Christians to the Sacrifice of Christ and the manner in which the Holy Communion is a sacrifice, because they believe them to be essential for maintaining such fundamental truths as the Lordship of Christ over his Church, salvation by grace, and for the avoidance of such prevalent errors as Pelagianism. They do so in the firm conviction that they are thus being faithful to the Church of England as Catholic and Reformed.

I believe that our primary intention in seeking unity must be that of being obedient to the truth as revealed in Christ. What matters is that the focus of our thoughts must not be on each other, so that we are tempted to negotiate or seek diplomatic agreements, but on our Living Lord. We must work and pray for unity in a spirit of obedience to His authority and the Revelation which he has given to us in Scripture and in the life of His Church.