Not Union, But Federation

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'LET the minorities tell us what their scheme is. But they won't, they won't, they won't,' says Dr. Ramsey. The Anglican-Methodist Scheme is dead. It has died through lack of votes. Lack of enthusiasm. Lack of joy. Let us not mourn too much, but after a quick post-mortem look to the new horizons which a death in the family often brings to the surviving members.

Fatal Defects

WHAT does the post-mortem reveal? To me, the first signs of a fatal disease began to appear when it became the established practice to sweep all the real difficulties under the carpet, to be dealt with at Stage 2. Little things (if they are little), like the nature of the elements at Holy Communion, or more important things like the priesthood of the priesthood—everyone now agrees about the priesthood of the laity. At every point it seemed that doctrinal issues were being tortured and twisted and maimed on the Procrustean bed of organisational efficiency. It was said that all these difficulties could be sorted out at Stage 2. Fair enough, if Stage 1 could be regarded as provisional and not final. But all along there has been the strange insistence that a vote for Stage 1 is a vote for Stage 2. It was made quite clear that this particular engagement could not be broken: the passing of Stage 1 was to mean that the marriage was on.

Some of us were very keen on the inter-communion promised in Stage 1 (and let's face it, a very large number of Anglican churches already have an *Open Table* at Holy Communion, and have good doctrinal and historical grounds to support their practice). But we were not prepared to give a blank cheque for Stage 2—institutional amalgamation—under whose carpet were 'things creeping innumerable, both small and great beasts'.

The second fatal disease of the Scheme, which was pin-pointed by the Dean of Carlisle in his speech in Convocation on 8th July 1969, was the fact that it was a product of the ecumenical atmosphere of the '30's, '40's and '50's. Since then, a new ferment has been working in Christendom, outdating the brand of ecumenism of that era.

Unity Differs from Union

WHEN Archbishop Fisher returned from his historic visit to Rome, he gave a useful warning that, whilst 'unity' had been promoted by the occasion, 'union' had not. Unity, he said, is one thing: organic union something totally different. Cardinal Heenan in his 1969 sermon in St. Paul's Cathedral re-echoed this thought, and carried it a stage further. 'If we have unity,' he asked, 'is union necessary?' 'Master,' said the disciples, 'we saw one casting out devils in Thy Name, and we forbade him, because he followeth not us.' 'Forbid him not,' said our Lord, 'for he that is not against us is on our side.' Ought we not to learn from this that structural uniformity may not be the ideal to aim at, but may instead actually be a source of frustration of the freedom of the Spirit? Can it be that non-conformity is of the essence of Christian progress? And does not history itself confirm this? Christendom would be infinitely the poorer if the protest of new ways of expressing the Christian faith was stifled by complacent acquiescence from a single-structured church, geared to bend over backwards to prevent schism. New truth and new falsehood would tend to be given the same soft-soap treatment. Far better that both should be severely tested, questioned, disciplined, and that time and the Christian conscience should eventually recognise the one and reject the other. The real enemy of the Christian faith is not schism in the body of the Church, but heresy in its soul. We must come to recognise schism—the dividing of a primitive form of life into two or more new forms—to be as vitally necessary in the Church as it is in the world of nature. There are those who would put the Christian Church back into the era of the undivided amoeba. Could it be that one motive for this desire, strong, unseen and unrecognised, is a lust for administrative power?

The Gospel Basis for Christian Federation

DR. MASCALL has reminded us that 'one' is a very ambiguous word. This is a thought worth pursuing in the Church's present predicament. Our Lord's 'that they all may be one' is often quoted in ecumenical circles. Not so often quoted are the words that follow: 'as Thou, Father, are in Me, and I in Thee.' The oneness of the Father and the Son does not impair their individual personalities. Does not this

suggest that the unity which is in the mind of our Lord for his Church is one which preserves proper distinctive identity—for groups of Christians no less than for individuals? Again, Christ says, 'I am the Vine; ye are the branches.' The branches all take their life from the Vine (and wither if they do not abide in it). But they branch out individually, with a life in Christ of their own. What sort of a tree would it be that had no branches? Can we not then, with our Lord's full approval, and indeed under his command, see Christendom as the Vine of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, with natural and divinely inspired branches which are all the Churches, with their different and Spirit-given emphases, and no scandal attached?

We speak of 'daughter churches' and 'sister churches'. Is not this perhaps better terminology for the phenomenon of Christian union than that of marriage? The ideal relationship between parents and children, and of brothers and sisters, is one of separate establishments whose members are reciprocally on the best of visiting terms. What consternation would be caused if a married daughter suddenly announced that she and her husband and children were giving up their own home, and coming to live under her parents' roof? The Methodist Church set up her own spiritual home, with its own distinctive ethos, soon after John Wesley's death; and the Methodist household has been abundantly blessed of God. Must this Church now abandon its distinctiveness, and the Church of England likewise, for the doubtful privilege of organisational efficiency? 'The children of thine elect sister greet thee' says the Apostle John (2 John v. 13). He makes no mention of any threat to move in on their aunt.

The Structure of Federation

FROM all this we may see that unity in Christ does not by any means forbid, but rather encourages, 'differences of administration' and 'diversities of operations', for 'the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man, to every church, to profit withal.' If I were asked for one phrase in which to describe the ideal of a Federated Christendom, I would fall back on the old dictum, 'In essentials unity; in non-essentials liberty; in all things charity.'

Unity in essentials. The essentials of the Christian faith—the things without which a man or a fellowship, however well-meaning or good-living, is not Christian, and with which, however faulty or sinful he maybe, he is—are inescapably the articles for our belief. We have been bedevilled of late years by suggestions, which are becoming more and more dogmatic and clamorous, that things are more important than doctrine. These suggestions are entirely false, and are indeed lovingly propagated by the devil. Nothing on earth of whatever nature bears any relation in importance to the truth of the Gospel, the nature of

the Holy Trinity, and their purpose for sinful mankind. We must refuse all substitutes. *Christian* Aid is the application of the medicines of the Gospel to fallen and mortal man. The society of this name that takes for its gospel Pest Management and Family Planning would do a great service to the Christian cause by changing its title, say, to 'Human Aid—sponsored by Christians'—a necessary but different thing. We are being mesmerised into exchanging the offence of the Cross for a massive programme of material betterment to which no one can possibly object, and which studiously avoids the controversy of the Gospel.

In another field as well, that of the World Council of Churches, which might be thought to be just the Federated Body we are looking for, we are due for disappointment. It too has been memerised into subjecting the Gospel to expediency, by the retention of Unitarianism within its membership. Unitarians may put us to shame by their zeal for good causes. But we put Christ to shame if we make no real distinction between their faith and ours. It was a speech by a Unitarian member which prevented the British Council of Churches from making a much-needed pronouncement on multifaith services. How could they do otherwise, being multi-faith themselves? "Have they not recently appointed a Buddhist as their executive secretary in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia?"

No. Federated Christendom must be Gospel-based, and must not degenerate into a fellowship of all men of good will. If it becomes this, it ceases to be the other. Christendom must be Christ-centred.

Liberty in non-essentials. Let Christians, once they have declared their Christian interest, which is the spread of the Gospel of Christ, the one Saviour of all mankind, have every liberty of congregation, first with other Christians on the basis of their common faith, and secondly with all men on the basis of a common humanity. A Christian, for example, may lawfully and rightly subscribe to the Turkish Red Crescent—a relief organisation—as well as to the British Red Cross. By doing so he subscribes, not to Islam, but to the world's need. 'Home sum,' says Plautus, 'nihil humanum a me alienum puto'—'I am a man: I reckon that nothing human is alien to me.' Let us, by all means *as human beings* subscribe to human needs of every kind but one, and that the deepest. To this basic need, of forgiveness of sin and for the gift of eternal life, it is *as Christians* that we subscribe, and here we must of necessity part company with all those of other faiths or of none with whom we have hitherto happily and fully co-operated. To do otherwise would be to betray our Lord, for we are committed to the proclamation that 'there is no other name under heaven granted to men, by which we may receive salvation' (Acts 4:12, NEB).

Christians amongst Themselves

IN a Federated Christendom, one would expect the utmost liberty in the exchange of the courtesies of Christian fellowship. By all means let Christians organise themselves as they feel led, as regiments, or 'divisions', in the one Army of Christ—Episcopalians as Episcopalians, Presbyterians as Presbyterians, Methodists as Methodists, and so on. Let them be jealous of their own interior discipline for their own members, and respectful of the discipline of other Churches for theirs. But let there be full and free communion, in the literal sense as well as in every other: in the same way as regimental discipline allows officers of one regiment of the Queen's army to 'mess' with those of another, without any violation of the discipline of either. Their messing together transcends regimental discipline, and deepens their loyalty to each other and to their Queen. Let us in the light of this homely example take a fresh look at inter-communion, and see it as an act which transcends the necessary, interior, domestic discipline of sister-churches whilst deepening the loyalty of members of each to each other and to their Lord. It is an act which does not affect in the slightest degree the structure of the host-church, or the status of the guest-communicant. A Baptist who receives Communion in an Anglican church does not make that church more Baptist by his act, not himself one whit more Anglican. It would be far different if, for example, an Anglican attended and voted at the Methodist Conference. In doing this, he would be affecting the whole structure of Methodism—a church not his own. If he wished to do this, he should submit to the discipline and membership of the Methodist Church, and be released, in consequence, from the similar but distinct discipline and membership of Anglicanism.

A Reassessment of What is Vital

WE need, in this respect, to reassess the relative importance of unity and union. Two representatives of the same firm can vitally strengthen their links with each other, as firm's representatives, by having 'working lunches' together, and this link is not weakened when each goes home to his own house and family. The firm's interests will not necessarily be best served by the two families moving into one house. On the 'family' side of each there are legitimate differences of a domestic kind which may be best preserved by remaining separate.

It is significant that after the Great Ejectment of 1662, nonconformists were not only admitted to Communion in their parish churches, but *enjoined* to be present. Was not this an early groping, in the almost impossible ecclesiastical circumstances of the day, after a unity in the faith coupled with a diversity of church organisation?

A Council of Christendom

I ENVISAGE therefore a Council of Christendom whose concern shall be simply and solely the maintenance and extension of 'the faith once delivered to the saints'. It will guard against the mistake of earlier groups of Churches, of attempting to become also the one vehicle of Christian expression and interpretation, in ever-changing world circumstances. This expression will be left to each member-church to carry out in the way that church feels best. And there will be great variety of expression.

The attempt to find one body to be in every respect 'the Church' is a chasing of the will-o'-the-wisp. There are so many ways of expressing Christian truth in each situation that one voice is quite insufficient. It would become a voice mouthing more and more sonorous, and more and more meaningless, generalities. 'There shall be wars and rumours of wars.' So, let there be Christian pacifists, and Christian warriors, each declaring clearly their own partial insight into the Christian truths of apartness and involvement. For who art thou that judgest thy brother? To his own Lord he stands or falls.

As for the overlapping of Christian effort, a word worth bearing in mind from Scripture is that 'two are better than one, for if one falls, the other shall lift up his fellow' (Eccl. 4:10). Friendly rivalry in the Gospel may be more to the mind of Christ than well calculated theories of financial economy. A certain amount of Christian accommodation is of course highly desirable. Schemes for the mutual deployment of Christian forces are already being devised and carried out in new areas through the work of the Churches' Main Committee. The Council of Christendom would advise along these lines, and be a clearing-house for information, in established areas as well; but not in such a way as to forbid churches working cheek by jowl, if, of policy, or through the conviction of one church or another, it was felt that the Christian cause required it.

Unity of Faith with Variety of Expression

IS it not possible that such a new, flexible pattern of federated churches, based upon unity of faith, and a joyful and positive acceptance of variety of practice, might under the Divine Providence open the way for a new conception of unity, as of a Gospel tree, whose many leaves would be for the healing of the nations?