

The Reformation and the Church Today

T. H. L. PARKER*

IT IS ARGUABLE that there is little or no point in looking to the Reformers of the sixteenth century for help as we today try to be the church. Four hundred years have passed since they could talk of 'the church today'. Very different conditions obtain in the world; there is a very different climate of thought. Between them and us lie many new movements, changing life and thought. The Enlightenment, the Oxford Movement, Romanticism, Christian Socialism, have made the thought world of the sixteenth century almost obsolete. The industrial revolution, the incredible emergence of technological and scientific understanding and skills with their powers of destruction and healing, the so-called shrinking of the globe because of swift means of travel and because of the mass media—I need not go on. Of course, on the other side it is true that the origin of much modern thinking lies back in the Renaissance. That was, after all, the age of Copernicus and Galileo, of Harvey and Bacon. But how rudimentary, even embryonic, it all seems now. The nearest Copernicus and Galileo ever got to the moon was at this end of a telescope. Leonardo's inventions remained on the drawing board; his flying machines did not drone over London, nor his tanks pound into Monte Cassino. It was no doubt wonderful to learn that blood circulated through the body; but to restart circulation after 'death' was still four centuries away. It is also true that the age in which *they* lived seemed revolutionary to them. And in a sense this was so; but to outward seeming life went on, apart from church life, pretty much in 1550 as it had done in 1450. But 1550 and 1950!

From all this it would almost seem that the only thing the Reformers could teach us would be that we should be as good Churchmen in our day as they were in theirs. But let us try to carry this a stage further. They were very much men of their own age, late medieval or Renais-

* A paper given at the refresher course at St. John's College, Durham on June 29th 1972.

sance men. They were having to reconstruct the church and its life in new situations; they were having to build from the very foundation. And it is this fact that gives a perennial quality to their work of re-forming the church. But the very task of re-formation meant that they were trying to give expression to their concept of the church.

It is with this concept that we may occupy ourselves.

1. *The Church as the whole Christ.* This is not a modern idea, discovered by E. Mersch. It comes in Calvin more than once. Thus: 'There is so great a unity between the Head and the members that the name "Christ" sometimes includes the whole Body.' Or: 'The name "Christ" is here used for the Church . . . and he calls the Church Christ.' Or: 'It is a great encouragement for us to hear that not until he holds us as one with himself is he complete in all his parts, not until then does he wish to be regarded as whole.' Here is indicated the entity composed of two parts, Christ and his people. Christ is the Head; the people of Christ the Body. The Son of God, in himself sufficient, determined to be one with man, to create a unity of himself with certain men. Hence, what is the Head without the Body? What is the Body without the Head? Each would be grotesque and useless. The whole Christ is the Head and the Body.

2. *The Body of Christ.* Is this a sufficient statement of the essence of the church? No; for if Christ may not be divided from his people and remain the whole Christ, how may the people be divided from Christ and remain the Body of Christ? The Body of Christ is only that which is united with the Head. Separate the Body from the Head and there remains but a lifeless trunk. Only in union with the Head is the Body living and active. That the church is a *corpus* is obvious. That it is the *corpus Christi* is not self-evident. How does it come about that a *corpus* of human beings is united with the Son of God so as to form one entity? In what sense is this union realised? There are objective and subjective sides here. The objective is primary and determinative. It is God's grace. The subjective is secondary and becomes possible only on the basis of the objective side. It is man's faith.

The objective side of the union of Christ and his church is the Incarnation—that is, the becoming man of the Son of God and the reconciliation which he effected in his humanity. By his grace in becoming man the Son of God united himself to man and man to himself. Thus in Jesus Christ, the Son of God is united with man and man with the Son of God. This unity of divine and human in Jesus Christ is the foundation of the unity between Christ and his church, between the Head and the Body. But the union is not purely one of *being*. According to the Reformers, Jesus Christ was man in our place. In our place and for us he fulfilled the Law which man could not fulfil. In our place and for us he died as a sinner, under the curse, the rejection, of God. By thus taking our place he united

himself with us as those under God's judgment, and he united us with himself as the one judged and condemned by God. But the crucified man rose again to eternal life and glory. Because it was in his human body that he gloriously rose, the eternally glorious Son of God united himself with men and men with himself. All this is the objective side which, as God's grace, is primary and determinative. It stands whether man knows it or not. Nor can man's lack of faith negative it, overcoming God's grace. If man does not believe, Jesus Christ is still the God-Man who has made himself one with man in sin and glory.

But there is the subjective union of man with Christ. And this union is faith. Note that the Reformers do not say that the union is *by* faith, but that it *is* faith. Faith itself is the subjective union of man with Christ. Sometimes they will speak of faith and sometimes of the Holy Spirit as being this union, but they plainly believed that they were saying the same thing in a different way. Faith, which is God's creation in man, is the recognition and acknowledgment that the reality of man's existence is to be found, not in his own antagonistic existence, which is not the truth but the denial of the truth, i.e. a lie, but in the existence of Jesus Christ. 'Who am I?' faith asks. And answers: 'I am the man who joyfully and willingly has fulfilled the Law, the will of God. I am the man who died to sin once and over whom therefore sin has no dominion. I am the man who has risen from the death of sin to the life of righteousness.' I, the breaker and hater of the Law? I, the sinner who prefer my way to God's? Yes; the reality of my existence is in Christ, who united himself with my humanity and did all that he did for my sake and in my place. This is the recognition and acknowledgment of the reality, truth and validity of Christ's uniting himself with man. And on the subjective side, it is the recognition of the possibility and the acknowledgment of the actuality of the person's uniting himself with Christ. What is true of the individual is true here of the church. This *corpus* of men is the *corpus Christi* on the basis of this twofold union.

But the concept of union carries a further implication. The Reformers conceived of such a union that what was true of one party was true also of the other, that what belonged to one party belonged also to the other. Luther worked this out in terms of marriage and its community of goods. There is no *meum* and *tuum* between Christ and the soul. Christ takes my sin and ungodliness and gives me his righteousness and grace. With Calvin, it may be said that this theme runs all through the *Institutio*. Christ is no mere agent through whom God effects his purposes of salvation and re-creation, but rather, all the blessings won by Christ in his obedient sufferings are inherent in him and do not exist apart from him. But he is no private person, but the one who joins himself inseparably to his people. Thus union with him will mean that we share in what belongs to him. We find in

Calvin this principle that any blessing is simply a participation in Christ's blessing.

Now let us approach this question from a different angle. The 'marks of the church' is a concept not much in favour now, but one that we find in the early church and, in a characteristic manner, in the Reformers. Nowadays we concentrate on the qualities of the church—unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity. And certainly the church must both be these and strive to become them. But the marks of the church have a different bearing. This concept is intended to make the churchhood of the church plain and therefore distinguishable from that which is not church. It is in this way that the marks were applied by the Reformers.

Luther, prodigal as mother nature, could on occasion enumerate as many as thirteen. But usually he, like Calvin, spoke of two—the proclamation of the Gospel and the Sacraments. Where the pure Gospel is declared and where the Sacraments are duly administered, then there is the church. Where these things do not take place, then, however impressive all the other associated phenomena, there is not the church.

i. *The Declaration of the Word of God.* By this they meant fundamentally the transmission of the message of redemption in Christ, together with the consequences and ramifications of it. This means that at least two persons are necessary to compose a church, one who speaks and one who hears. There is, of course in the Reformation an emphasis on the *pure* preaching of the Gospel. Later (and there is even a strain of this in the Reformers themselves) 'pure' referred to orthodoxy of doctrine. But the primary meaning related to the nature of the Gospel itself. The Gospel is the good news that God sent his Son to die and rise again for us and that in him we have the good favour of God. The *pure* Gospel is the declaration that makes this clear. It is, for Luther, that which most clearly and strongly portrays Christ, the Son of God and of the Virgin Mary, in his saving office and urges faith in him. Where this happens, there is the church.

ii. *The Sacraments.* The separation of Word and sacrament, which can be seen all too often in the Middle Ages and in later Protestantism, is foreign to the Reformers. For them Word and sacraments are two aspects of the one activity of God in Christ by the Holy Spirit. We hear the Word of God with our ears. We perceive the Word of God with our other senses, principally, perhaps, with our eyes. This is why J. McLelland could justifiably use the Augustinian slogan *The Visible Words of God* for his book on Peter Martyr's eucharistic theology. The message which God communicates to the ear he confirms to the other senses, and particularly to the eye. It is the same message, from the same source, to the same destination, but it has a different medium and therefore a different mode of perception.

Now, these are the marks by which the church is recognisable.

But this means 'recognisable to the eyes of faith', for this is not just a sensory recognition. We cannot say that anyone who perceives that the Gospel is being preached and the sacraments administered can know that *there* is the church. For who knows that the Gospel is the Gospel but the believer? To recognise Gospel is to recognise it *as* Gospel, i.e. as the good news that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and the Son of Mary who died and rose again for our salvation. And who can recognise that except the man who believes it? Hence, 'marks of the church' is a judgment of faith. Hence too, where there is no faith, the church is hidden, just as hidden as Christ himself. To the unbelieving world, the church is only another human group. For those within, the existence of the church is believed, not seen. Thus Luther: 'Because the Church is a work and construction of Christ, it does not appear outwardly to be anything, but its whole structure is internal, invisible before God; and thus it is known, not to the fleshly eyes, but to the spiritual, in the mind and in faith.'

But on the other hand, we have to come back to this, that the marks by which the church is recognised in faith as church are concrete activities. The judgment of faith is made, not on the basis of the qualities of the church (its holiness, catholicity, etc.) but on that of its activities. 'By their works ye shall know them' is valid here too. In other words, we are saying something about this earthly community the church. We are, of course, not saying that this earthly community exists. A glance at the church notice board will tell us this. But we are saying that this earthly community is the church, the other part of the whole Christ.

Why these two marks? How does it happen that they are the valid criteria? We return to what we said earlier. What constitutes the church? It is not merely a body of people with a common faith, hope, and love. The church is Christ and his people, the Head and the Body. Without any people there is no church (for example, there was no church before the creation). Without Christ there is no church. Now it is the presence of Christ that makes the society into the church, the *corpus* into *corpus Christi*. But how is Christ present? The answer of the Reformers is that he is present in his Word, and this means in Scripture, preaching, and the sacraments. What they have in mind is this: There is not any communication between God and man, there is not any contact of man with God, except in God's self-revelation in the Mediator; and the vehicle of the Mediator is the existence and activity of Jesus of Nazareth and the human proclamation of the good news. There is good New Testament basis for this in the use of *Logos theou* for both Christ and for the message about Christ. When the good news and its consequences and ramifications are declared, this is not merely a declaration about someone who is absent. The subject of the Gospel is present as the substance of the Gospel. As a later confession put it, 'The preaching of the Word of God is the Word of

God.' And what is true of the Gospel is true also in a different mode of the Sacraments. Therefore the two marks of the church are criteria by which faith judges whether Christ is present and therefore whether this earthly *corpus* really is *corpus Christi*, the church, the other part of the whole Christ.

Thus far the Reformers. Is this whole concept of the Head and the Body together with the marks of the church at all relevant and useful to us today? Certainly it must be said that this way of looking at the matter is foreign to us. Suppose we were to ask how we today judge the church to be the church. No doubt we should get some funny answers. But in general the real answer is that we do not bother very much about it. We may doubt or deny the existence of God; we may disapprove of the existence of the church; but we do not doubt that it exists. Even if we are seized with questionings we are far more likely to apply as criteria the qualities of the church rather than the marks.

But let us try to look at it from another point of view. It might be thought that doubts about the church-ness of the church will only sap our endeavours and engender what we might term an ecclesianeurosis. But one needs to worry desperately about something only when one can do nothing about it. Thus hyper-Calvinists might well be anxious as to whether they were elect or reprobate. In this sphere it lies not in mortals to command success. But with the church it is quite a different matter. We *are* able to be the church. God himself has made this possible for us by establishing and fulfilling his side of the new covenant. If we do not take up the possibility, that is our own fault. Every incumbent in England can determine to be the church in his own place. And, if the Reformers are right, this means in practice determining that in his parish the Word of God shall be sovereign.

The issue is two-sided. First there is the necessity of cleaving to or of recovering the understanding that the Word of God is God's complete and unique self-revelation. Here Word of God means the Incarnate Word, the written Word and the proclaimed Word. To the extent that we hold to this, say the Reformers, to that extent and to that extent only is a society the church. This is the strait way, excluding all other ways. And secondly, to determine to be the church in our own place (which, of course, is not a once for all decision but has to be new every morning) means placing and keeping firmly before our eyes the Christ who was incarnate, died and rose again, and to refuse to have anything at all to do with any other knowledge of God—even at Harvest Festival. It means determining that Holy Scripture shall have the primacy in our church, both in worship and in other activities; that ours shall be a church ruled by Scripture (which is another way of saying that the Body shall be presided over by the Head); and it means making the revolutionary and courageous determination that the

preaching of the Gospel (*polumerōs kai polutropōs*) shall be, in the form or forms relevant to the situation, the real activity, transforming the society into the church, the *corpus* into the *corpus Christi*.