

# Faith and Unity

GRAHAM LEONARD

---

THE SUBJECTS OF THE first two Sections, upon which I have been asked to comment, are closely related. Both are overtly theological, whereas the subjects of the other Sections are only implicitly so. The basic problem to be discussed by Section I is well described in one of the questions given in the Notes for that Section: 'How do we relate the basic historical apostolic witness to Christ to the ongoing apostolate of the Church?' Section II is primarily concerned with the essential nature of the church and with the kind of unity which that nature demands that we should seek.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to assess together the dossiers prepared for each of the first two Sections. The format is the same, the dossier consisting of (1) a short statement entitled 'Notes for Sections, Fifth Assembly', (2) a series of loose leaf briefs, each dealing with an aspect of the subject with a list for further reading. Even so, omitting the book-list, the dossier for Section I has nine briefs, whereas that for Section II has four.

The real difficulty in assessing the two dossiers together lies in the markedly different approach which is adopted. The 'Notes for Sections' of Section I posits a number of very important questions, nineteen in all, set out in eight groups. Group I concern the relation of the contemporary apostolate to the historical witness. The questions in Group II, while appearing to anticipate the question of unity and its relation to witness, really ask how the church, being of necessity sinful in that it is composed of those who while in Christ are not yet made fully perfect, can witness to Christ. The third Group of questions asks how the saving presence of Christ is to be discerned today. The next Group asks what acceptance of the Lordship of Christ must mean in contemporary society. The questions in Group V raise the question of how a church which is not yet a visible one can witness effectively. The importance of the liturgical life of the church for its witness is the subject of the next Group of questions. Those in Group VII present

the acute problem of the relationship between confessing Christ and culture. The last Group deals with the eschatological aspects of witness.

The general effect of the 'Notes for Section I' is to stimulate and to encourage. The questions seem to be the right ones, though they raise the further question of how such a wide range of such deeply fundamental issues can be dealt with adequately by a Section of some 400 people in the space of three weeks. Surely some underlying themes, common to all the questions, must be isolated and identified if the discussion is to be fruitful. It was, however, with considerable anticipation and hope that I turned to the briefs, only to be sadly disappointed. With the exception of one, that from the Orthodox Church, to which I shall return later, I found them to be largely man-centred and to concentrate upon human difficulties in confessing Christ today. They seem but to rephrase most of the questions which had already been presented, in concrete terms as experienced by individuals or by churches in various parts of the world. I have no doubt that I can and must learn from the experience of others, especially from those who are suffering persecution or who are faced with acute political dilemmas, but I had anticipated that this would be largely effected in the Assembly itself, as together from our experience we sought to grapple with the basic issues to which the preparatory material had directed us. I had hoped that such material would have both enabled me to see why Christians in a particular place were expressing their witness in a particular way, and to discuss with them how much of that expression was contingent and temporal due to their situation and how much reflected the eternal nature and will of God. My sense of need for such help was intensified when I read the *Theological Declaration of Korean Christians*, 1973. This is printed without any indication of its source or authority. It happened to be the one document which I could check at first hand. The Suffragan Bishop of St. Germans in my Diocese returned last year after 20 years in the country, having spent the last six years as Bishop of Taejon. From him I learned that the document reflects the opinion of but a section of Christians in Korea who have adopted a particular attitude to the current regime, and not, as one might have supposed, the mind of Christians generally in that country.

With the ninth brief, which consists of the Reports of Groups at a Consultation of Orthodox Theologians in Bucharest in June 1974, I felt that I had moved into a different dimension. While a deep and sensitive awareness of man's condition is evident, that condition is not allowed to dominate the discussion. To adapt the words of the Quicunque Vult, when reading briefs 1-8 I was conscious of the danger of the conversion of the Godhead into flesh, whereas with brief 9 I was reminded of the need to see Christian discipleship as the taking of manhood into God.

Brief 10, the list of books and articles for further reading, strikes me as being rather weak and restricted. The non-Orthodox publications are largely confined to WCC documents which means that the element of self-criticism is rather muted. The articles in the Orthodox list are not easy to obtain, and a general introduction to Orthodox theology, such as Vladimir Lossky's brilliant *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* published in both French and English, would be a most desirable addition.

Although, as I have said, the structure of the dossier for Section II is the same as that for Section I, the content is significantly different. The introductory sheet 'Notes for Sections—Section I—What Unity requires' consists of a brief summary of the present situation with regard to the achievement of visible unity. It is, however, a little difficult to follow the underlying thought. It is recognised that 'the search for more visible unity is being called into question' and that 'many people express doubts whether organised unity can and ever should be achieved'. The questions are then asked: 'Can the concern for unity not diminish the commitment to the liberating message of Jesus Christ? Does it not inevitably imprison the Church in heavy institutions? Should the ecumenical movement not overcome the overemphasis on unity and concentrate more on proclamation?' The Notes then recognise that, in response to such critical questions, many churches are calling for a renewed and more embracing reflection on the true nature of unity.

The Notes also recognise that, while movement towards unity has taken place, new divisions are arising over such questions as racism and other struggles for social justice, and ask what implications such divisions have for the unity and witness of the church. They also draw attention to the problems created by the charismatic movement which is creating new unities across confessional lines. These are most important questions which have to be answered. The last Section (D) of the Notes, however, rather gives the impression of bypassing these questions and of urging progress in each separate country between existing churches.

Brief I of the dossier deals with the setting of the search for unity. It draws attention to the implications for unity of the growing recognition of the interdependence of mankind. It seeks to spell out the problems which must be faced if the church is to encourage true interdependence and not to present obstacles by carrying divisive cultures with the Gospel. Brief 2 considers the goal of unity and how to describe the unity which we seek. The first section consists of quotations from the Reports of earlier Assemblies. One quotation of Edmund Schlink from *What Unity Implies* (World Council Studies No. 7, 1969) is particularly important and make a point which is reflected in a quotation from Bishop Stephen Neill at the end of the dossier. Edmund Schlink writes 'It is also certain that none of the

Churches can remain exactly as it is. In every case they need to be renewed and to develop catholicity, i.e. they need a conversion to God and to the other Churches. Biased views must be eliminated, inadequacies must be remedied, errors must be corrected and anathemas removed. Unification will not be possible without sacrifice. But when the sacrifice is offered to God there is no loss and there is only self-surrender to a wealth which is greater than what one possessed before'.

The second Section deals with the qualities of the 'unity we seek'. It might have been better phrased as 'the unity we seek to implement' for the passages quoted in the section drive home the fundamental truth that the unity of Christians has already been given by God in Christ. What members of the church have to do is to allow that unity to be expressed in their corporate life by growth in holiness and truth. The third section, which considers how the unity of the church is to be understood and realised, also emphasises this point, particularly in the contribution from the Orthodox Church by Ion Bria. This section is both realistic and creative, taking very seriously the two fundamental questions of the relationship between spiritual and organised unity and the problems of theological differences. The extract from C. Darby Fulton's article in *Christianity Today* is most valuable. Writing forcefully but in an eirenic way, he draws out the two dangers of pursuing visible unity at the expense of theological truth, and of monopolism whether of power or expected life-style. In view of the stress in the theme of the Fifth Assembly on the liberating force of the Gospel, the following of his questions are very pertinent. Does Christian liberality flourish when churches unite? Are consciences free that are forced to bend to compromise? Earlier in the extract he has pointed out that any attempt to force an organic union (with majorities coercing minorities) might result in resentment and even open rebellion with the last state being worse than the first. The fourth section concerns the effect upon the search for unity of the emergence of new movements such as the charismatic movement and the various forms of the para-church. While it is recognised that here we are faced with an old phenomenon in a new form, there is little evidence of willingness to learn from the way in which the phenomenon in its old form was faced. One strength of the Roman Catholic Church in the past has been its ability to contain and canalise the insights of reformers and allow them as leaven to benefit the whole church, as in the case of St. Francis or St. Ignatius Loyola. The tendency in the Protestant tradition on the other hand has been for the influence of such reformers to lead to further divisions. What is important to realise at the present time is that to allow commitment to a particular reform, a certain kind of political action, or a distinctive life-style, to be regarded as the only legitimate expression of being a 'proper', a committed Christian, is to be very divisive. It is but one expression of the phenomenon examined by Mgr. Ronald Knox in his book *Enthusiasm*, which makes the

church the place for an élite and not the redeeming community for sinners. The next section, which asks whether a common vision of unity can be developed, makes illuminating quotations about the church as sacrament and sign and as conciliar fellowship, and in section F faces the issue of whether unity must imply loss of identity.

Brief 3 of the dossier turns to the growing consensus among the churches as exemplified in the various agreed statements about baptism, the eucharist and the ministry. While such statements are generally to be welcomed, they do need to be related to the formularies, the liturgical rites and the cult-pattern of the churches concerned in a much more realistic way than has so far been attempted, if the kind of criticisms referred to above in the quotation from C. Darby Fulton are to be answered. The recent collection of essays *A Critique of Eucharistic Agreement* (SPCK, 1975) is one step towards such consideration.

Brief 4 entitled 'How can we approach the fulfilment of the vision of the One Church?' is disappointing, mainly because it gives the impression that it was written without taking into account the earlier Briefs. The recognition then expressed that 'many people express doubts whether organised unity can and ever should be achieved' is left unheeded. The questions 'Can the concern for unity not diminish the commitment to the liberating message of Jesus Christ?' and 'Does not it inevitably imprison the Church in heavy institutions?' are not faced. Further, it assumes that 'unity must take shape in the actual situation of the country', which minimises the factor of world family relationships to which attention is drawn in a quotation from Latin America. The list of books for further reading in the dossier for Section II is considerably more useful than that for Section I, though in so far as it refers to specific schemes it needs up-dating. *The Plan of Union Consultation on Church Union* (in the USA) needs to be read in the light of recent developments about the future of that Scheme.

Generally speaking, however, the dossier for Section II is much more useful and stimulating than that for Section I. Although it does not attempt to give answers, it does discuss the questions realistically and faces the problems which are involved. In the second half of this article I want to try and analyse why this should be so, as it is possible that the answers may help discussion of the problems set out not only by Sections I and II but by all the Sections of the Assembly.

One evident characteristic of both dossiers is that the most fruitful and creative contributions are those which come from the Orthodox Churches. As I have already noted, the contrast between Brief 9 and the other Briefs in Section I is very marked. In those of Section II, while the distinctive emphasis of the Orthodox extracts is evident, the contrast is not so sharp, and there is a good deal more common ground. It is, however, important to examine the situation in the Section I document, not least because those for Section II draw attention to the need for that theological agreement with which Section I is primarily

concerned.

What then is the distinctive quality which marks the Orthodox contributions? If it is a quality which is essentially Christian, rather than contingent upon Orthodox culture and history, it should be welcomed and sought by all members of the Assembly as they seek to answer the questions set before them. Clues are given to the answers to these questions in the valuable introduction by the Chairman, N. A. Nissiotis, to Brief 9, that is the Reports of the Groups at a Consultation of Orthodox Theologians in Bucharest in June 1974, and which deserves to be quoted in full.

These four reports show the affirmation of Orthodox positions but at the same time betray the very strong desire of the participants at Cernica to become more open to the outside world in a spirit of humility and disposition to serve. It is to be noted that in the act of confessing the Orthodox begin with the theology of the Logos and move towards a commentary on the personal participation through the church community in His grace as the incarnate Son of God and in the power of the Holy Spirit. On this solid basis the Orthodox do not behave as if they possess the truth which therefore should be propagated or imposed on the non-believers through absolute principles and dogmatic scholastic formulations. Report I speaks of the need for humility and 'tenderness' of Christians towards all men. It is also interesting for readers of Reports No. 2 and 3 to notice the Orthodox attitude that the Eucharist should not be used as a tool for confessing Christ or as an instrument for mission, but as the focal event of the church community and as such must be seen as the spring-board, the starting event of Christians for confessing Christ in today's world. This is due to the fact that for the Orthodox the church community contains *a moment of affirmation of the reality of being in Christ* (my italics), enjoying faith in a distinctive celebrating community in and for the whole world. On this basis Report No. 4 builds the idea of the evangelistic task of the church in the modern world.

Another element which comes to the fore in the Report of Group No. 2 (an element which is highly disputed in contemporary theology) is: 'Is history building the Kingdom of God or is the Kingdom erupting into history as an antithesis to it?' Certainly the Orthodox position would be closer to the latter approach but this item was almost violently disputed during the latter part of the Consultation. On the main issue the Orthodox represent a variety of approaches but they would all agree that there is a point of departure which is given to the church as a pivot of historical reality and a eucharistic community and through this alone the Kingdom of God can be expected and grasped. This attitude, however, does not separate Church and world, holy and profane, sacred and secular, due to the very strong emphasis of the Orthodox through the Logos theology on the cosmic dimension of the salvation in Christ and the all-renewing operation of the Holy Spirit.

In a quotation from Brief 2 of Section II it is said that in all ecumenical debate Orthodox will emphasise the God-given ontological and indivisible unity of the Body of Christ, realised and preserved in history. They believe that this unity has existed continuously and without

interruption in the Orthodox Church, its doctrine, its sacraments and its essential order—even if its members either as individuals or as a historic fellowship fail to realise and manifest the implications of this divine gift.

‘A moment of affirmation of the reality of being in Christ’ and ‘this unity has existed . . . even if its members . . . fail to realise and manifest the implication of the divine gift.’ It is, I believe, the ability to think ontologically which is one of the chief characteristics of Orthodox thought, an ability which is not contingent upon adherence to any particular secular philosophy. I appreciate that to think ontologically is regarded as to engage in an outmoded activity which is philosophically untenable in the West today, but it is, I believe, precisely at this point that the real conflict between the Christian Gospel and the wisdom of the world is to be found. Unless I realise that ‘I am before I act’ I do not believe I can truly understand the Gospel or my existence either as a created being or as a created being redeemed in Christ. As Professor R. H. Fuller has put it in *The Foundations of New Testament Christology* (Collins, 1969), when discussing the relation between the being of Christ and his functions, ‘. . . it is not just a quirk of the Greek mind, but a universal human apperception that action implies prior being—even if, as is also true, being is only apprehended in action’ (p. 248). Professor Fuller goes on to point out how the New Testament scholar must pass on his material to the systematic theologian whose ‘task will be to work out the ontological implications of these statements in a systematic theology which will speak the gospel relevantly to contemporary thought’ (*op. cit.*, p. 249) and that ‘the New Testament scholar cannot suggest to the contemporary systematic theologian that he by-pass the whole ontological problem in favour of a purely functional Christology’ (p. 256). The necessity of ontological thought is not confined to the Person of Christ, though it is essential there and, if abandoned, leads to an adoptionist Christology. It is also necessary for a true doctrine of the sacraments if they are not to become culture rites, designed to help the worshipper and capable of modification if they do not. It is necessary for a true understanding of the place and function of the ministry if the worthiness and apparent usefulness of the minister are not to be the determinative factors in his ministrations. It is also necessary for consideration of the moral implication of being a human being and of being a Christian being if the meaning of ‘good’ is not to be reduced to that which is existentially relevant and fulfilling to the individual, instead of enabling him in his life to reflect the eternal qualities which are of God. Without an ontological understanding of the nature of the end in relation to God, the eschatological dimension becomes reduced to something earthbound and strangely like the Marxist view of the classless society to be achieved in history. Particularly relevant to the deliberation of the Fifth Assembly is that the rejection of ontology makes rational discourse difficult. The substitution of the criteria of meaningfulness or ‘usefulness’, which are

substituted for the criterion of truth, means that each man must do that which is right in his own eyes and that there is no appeal to a common standard.

Why do the Orthodox bear witness to this essential element in Christian thought? Largely, I think, because Orthodox theology has never been dominated by one school of philosophy as has so often been the case in the West. It is commonly said that Orthodox theology is based on Platonism while pre-Reformation Western theology is based on Aristotelianism but this does not accord with the facts. As far as dogmatic theology is concerned the influence of the Neo-Platonism of pseudo-Dionysius was more marked in the West, affecting, for example, certain aspects of the thoughts of St. Thomas Aquinas. The development of Palamism in the fourteenth century was in defence against attempts to impose neo-Platonism on the church. Certainly there is no parallel in the Eastern Church to the part played by scholasticism or nominalism in mediaeval thought. Since the Reformation, which itself was dominated by nominalism, the effect of which is still seen today, the history of Protestant thought on the Continent has largely been the history of the reaction of theologians and Biblical scholars to successive philosophies. In recent times, Bultmann's theology has been based upon the existential philosophy of Heidegger. That such a reaction can come to a sterile propositional theology, whether scholastic or Cartesian in origin, is understandable. Where it parts company with the outlook of the Bible and the New Testament in particular, is in its insistence that the existential alone must be the criterion of Gospel truth, rather than be the expression of man's creaturely and redeemed state as it is implemented. James Richmond sums up Bultmann's approach in these words: 'Man's authentic self is always his future self. . . . The man belongs to the realm of history rather than of nature' (*Faith and Philosophy*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1966, p. 162). It is difficult to reconcile this with the Biblical view of man which sees man as belonging both to history and nature, or indeed with the scientific view of man which regards him as part of the created world. Man exists in any relationship to God only by his nature as a created being, yet responds to the Divine acts in history by which that nature can fulfil its potential. It is as difficult to reconcile it with the Pauline view of man as a new creature in Christ, yet still in history seeking to implement that new status as he learns what it is to accept Christ as Lord. The concentration on history alone also removes the vertical dimension from the Christian eschatological hope. It is, I believe, the ontological understanding of the Orthodox rooted in the theology of the Logos which can deliver man from the self-centred theology to which alone existentialism inexorably leads him, while still leaving him free to work out his response in terms of his condition. As one writing for the English scene, I should add that much English theology and Biblical scholarship, while lacking the philosophical



toughness of that on the Continent, exhibits similar characteristics stemming from the influence of the Anglo-Saxon tradition of Analytical Philosophy and Logical Positivism in particular.

So, while I welcome the way in which the two dossiers open up the problem and ask the right questions, I hope that as a result of the Orthodox presence (which has steadily increased in numbers and influence over the years) there may be a recovery of the truth expressed in the Augustinian phrase 'Become what you already are', or in the more precise phrase of Professor C. F. D. Moule 'Become, in the Lord, what you already are in Christ' (*The Phenomenon of the New Testament*, SCM, 1967, p. 26), if our answers in the Assembly are to reflect obedience not to our condition and our needs, but to our living Lord who alone knows what our true condition is and what our real needs are.