

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *Indian Journal of Theology* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_ijt\\_01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ijt_01.php)

# The Lambeth Quadrilateral: Bane or Blessing?

W. STEWART

When the Report of the Lambeth Conference of 1958 was published, it was with some surprise that many readers discovered that the Committee on Church Unity and the Church Universal had found it appropriate to quote *verbatim*, and with manifest approval, the formula, in its 1920 form, which has become famous as 'The Lambeth Quadrilateral'. The action indicates a confidence within Anglican circles that that formula, so far from having outlived its usefulness, still stands as a tried and trusty guide for the work of Christian reunion. The tenor of the Report as a whole, and the lines along which Anglican Churches have been conducting negotiations in different parts of the world, support that judgement. This fact makes it rather urgently necessary, both for Anglicans and others, that there should be a fresh appraisal of the formula and its rôle in the ecumenical movement.

## I

It will be convenient to remind ourselves of the precise terms which have been used, and we may begin with the original form as it was adopted by the Lambeth Conference of 1888:

- A. (Resolution) That, in the opinion of this Conference, the following Articles supply a basis on which approach may be by God's blessing made towards Home Reunion:—
- (A) The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as 'containing all things necessary to salvation', and as being the rule and ultimate standard of faith;
  - (B) The Apostles' Creed, as the Baptismal Symbol; and the Nicene Creed, as the sufficient statement of the Christian faith;
  - (C) The two Sacraments ordained by Christ Himself—Baptism and the Supper of the Lord—ministered with the unfailing use of Christ's words of Institution, and the elements ordained by Him;
  - (D) The Historic Episcopate, locally adapted in the methods of its administration to the varying needs of the nations and peoples called of God into the unity of His Church.

Before we consider later developments of this formula, let it be acknowledged that the history of the ecumenical movement since 1888 contains abundant evidence of the influence which it has had, particularly in much of the discussion on Church Union. Not only so, but few would wish to deny that much of that influence has been beneficial, giving a useful focus and shape to debate which might otherwise have been hopelessly diffuse. Nevertheless, the assumption which has often been made that Plans of union have actually been drafted on the basis of this Quadrilateral ought to be treated with more reserve. In particular Anglican Churchmen would do well to make sure of their facts before they assume too readily that other Christian bodies are as sure as they are that we have here an authoritative blue print for the United Church of the future.

Again, it is very significant that debate, criticism and defence have largely centred on the fourth point of the formula, implying an emphasis which reflects the distinctive history of the Anglican Communion alone, which has always found it necessary on the one hand to justify its separation from Rome, while jealously maintaining its continuity from the years prior to that separation, and on the other hand to maintain its position over against the other churches of the Reformation. Indeed, with reference to the whole history of Anglican thinking on this subject, it is hard to resist the conclusion that it is strongly conditioned by the special problems of the Church of England, with its experience of Schism within its own territory on a scale far beyond that of any other national Church in Europe. It may be objected to this that in fact the 'Lambeth Quadrilateral' was derived from a draft supplied by the Protestant Episcopal Church in America. This fact does not, however, disprove the point, for there certainly was a long history which led up to the formulation of the Quadrilateral, and it is also perhaps not without significance that Bishop Huntingdon, to whose first draft in 1870 the formula may be traced, had by 1898 quite abandoned it in favour of a different approach to reunion which he believed to be more appropriate for the conditions in his own country.<sup>1</sup> In any case it is a distinctively Anglican formulation and, in these days of ecumenical thinking, it would certainly be a remarkable thing if it should turn out that the definitive statement on this vital subject should prove to have been produced within the counsels of a single Denomination and that many years before the major developments of the modern ecumenical movement had taken place.

## II

Let us now set out the Quadrilateral in the form which it took in 1920, together with certain comments made at different times

---

<sup>1</sup> See D. H. Yoder on *Christian Unity in Nineteenth Century America*, in Rouse and Neill: *History of the Ecumenical Movement*, Chapter 5.

by Lambeth Conferences, which are numbered for convenient reference later :

B. *The Quadrilateral of 1920 :*

We believe that the visible unity of the Church will be found to involve the whole-hearted acceptance of :—

The Holy Scriptures as the record of God's revelation of Himself to man, and as being the rule and ultimate standard of faith ;

And the Creed commonly called Nicene, as the sufficient statement of the Christian faith, and either it or the Apostles' Creed as the Baptismal confession of belief ;

The divinely instituted sacraments of Baptism and the Holy Communion, as expressing for all the corporate life of the whole fellowship in and with Christ ;

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.

C. *Comments made by the Lambeth Conference, 1920 ; on the fourth point :*

- (i) May we not reasonably claim that the Episcopate is the one means of providing such a ministry ?
- (ii) We submit that considerations alike of history and of present experience justify the claim which we make on behalf of Episcopacy.
- (iii) Moreover we would urge that it is now and will prove to be in the future the best means of maintaining the unity and continuity of the Church.

D. *Comment made on the fourth point by Lambeth, 1958 :*

Loyalty to the age-long tradition of the Church, and to our own experience, compels us to believe that a ministry to be acknowledged by every part of the Church can only be attained through the historic episcopate, though not necessarily in the precise form prevailing in any part of the Anglican Communion . . .

A careful study of the various statements shows us that in fact *two* claims are made regarding the points of the Quadrilateral, and most explicitly, regarding the historic episcopate.

1. There is the claim made most clearly in the sentence numbered C (iii) above, that episcopacy will be found to be ' the best means of maintaining and furthering the unity and continuity of the Church ' . This is also implied in the 1888 formula (A) that the points ' supply a basis on which approach may be made towards Home Reunion ' . This expresses the conviction that the elements mentioned should have a vital place in the pattern of the united Church to which we all look forward.

2. There is also the claim put forward in the sentence C (i) that Episcopacy is 'the one means of providing such a ministry'. It may be observed that in 1920 the phrase 'the Historic Episcopate' of 1888 was replaced by the more general phrase about 'a ministry acknowledged by every part of the Church . . .' Nevertheless, the claim made immediately afterwards that Episcopacy is 'the one means of providing such' makes it clear that the authors still have an episcopal ministry firmly in mind, and the preamble in 1920 asks for 'the whole-hearted acceptance' of the points involved. When we turn to 1958 the claim is once more set out in explicit terms (Comment D): 'loyalty . . . compels us to believe that a ministry acknowledged by every part of the Church can only be attained through the historic episcopate . . .'

It is obvious that the second claim is a more rigorous one than the first, and in spite of the 1958 acknowledgement of God's blessing on others, the terms which we have quoted show that Lambeth 1958 took an uncompromising stand on this point, using afresh the phrase 'the historic episcopate'. This is in line with other evidence, such as that contained in the *Report on Relations between Anglican and Presbyterian Churches*<sup>2</sup> (St. Andrew Press, 1957):

'On the Anglican side, full intercommunion would be impossible without raising the question of Episcopacy as a thing deemed requisite for its fulfilment between the Churches, even if otherwise agreement had been reached as to doctrine and practice'.

It is this second claim which in practice has made the Quadrilateral not only a pattern for a united Church but an authoritative measuring-rod for full recognition of other churches now.

### III

Before we take up an examination of these two claims, we may note that in 1920 Lambeth made an appeal to History and to Experience as upholding the claim for Episcopacy.<sup>3</sup> As regards History, it is of course a fact that during the greater part of Christian history episcopacy was the regular form of Church Government that prevailed. What is not so clear is that this form of government really did secure the unity and continuity of the Church. Even the early centuries have their sorry record of schism and of bishops in opposition who contend with the armoury of anathemas. There are today divisions which date from long before even the Great Schism of 1054, and the very divisions which marked the period of the Reformation at least show that the episcopal system did not prevent them from happening. Further, among the churches of the Reformation, actually none of them in Europe has shared the Anglican theory

---

<sup>2</sup> P. 24.

<sup>3</sup> See Comment C(ii) above.

of the necessity of the historic episcopate even when, as in the Church of Sweden, they have conserved the form of it. The agreed statement on the Church and the Ministry recently issued by a joint commission of the Lutheran Churches and the Church of South India,<sup>4</sup> which also appeals to history, does not find episcopacy to be an essential for a Church, although readily granting it an honoured place in much Church life. Finally it is perhaps not unimportant that in the story of schism and dissent which marks Church History both in England and in Scotland, nearly all seceding bodies in England included a rejection of episcopacy in their protest, often on the ground that they found that system at least partly responsible for their discontent, while in Scotland it was rare for a dissenting body to abandon Presbyterianism. Not only so, but within Scotland there has been a notable story of reunion with the national Church, by which many of these historic breaches have been largely healed, while in England the process has still to begin.

Lambeth also appeals to experience. It is entitled to quote its own experience from within its tradition. It cannot, however, expect to convey the same conviction to others who cannot but observe the divisions in episcopal churches in past centuries, or that the episcopal Church of England has a great problem of secession in its own territory, or that the great episcopally ordered Communion of Rome and Canterbury and Greece are not in communion, or that in India, in a land like Kerala, several bodies each with the historic episcopate are yet divided, or that the modern record of full organic unions concerns almost exclusively bodies which have not claimed the historic episcopate,<sup>5</sup> while it is the Anglican Churches which still withhold hearty acceptance of the one great Union (in South India) in which that episcopate played a part.

Whether or not we agree with them, surely we must respect the conscientious conviction of those who hold the place of the historic episcopate to be part of their very faith. This would seem to be the claim of Lambeth, 1958 where the Committee goes on to state: 'This ministry we believe to have been given to the Church by Divine Providence' (Report 2.22). But when the appeal is made to the empirical evidence of history and experience then it becomes necessary to point out quite simply that the evidence is not found to be convincing.

#### IV

We turn now to the two claims made for the historic episcopate which we saw to be involved in the Lambeth statements.

(1) There is the claim that the elements listed should find whole-hearted acceptance in the pattern of a united Church and,

---

<sup>4</sup> *South India Churchman*, May, 1959.

<sup>5</sup> See Rouse and Neill: *History of the Ecumenical Movement*, Appendix to Chapter 10.

in particular, that, when it comes to Church polity, it will be found that episcopacy is the best means to secure Church unity and continuity. Let us without hesitation concede that the Anglican Churches are entirely in order in putting forward such suggestions for the constitution of a united Church, just as others will put forward their own, based on their experience. In all Union negotiations it is essential to reach some prior agreement on the main structure of the constitution on which all shall come together. In this matter, since 1888, the Anglican Churches have steadily pressed for their four famous principles, and in fact union schemes have found a place for all four. There has not usually been serious dispute about the first three, and it has generally been agreed that there should be an important episcopal element in a united ministry. Equally definitely others have tried to guard against dangers which they have detected in some episcopal systems and have sought an episcopate constitutional as well as historic. Means have been found, however, to satisfy both points of view and to provide for an episcopate which would satisfy the Anglicans as being historic. As to whether or not this is actually the 'best means' is a question on which there may be differences of view, but no difficulty need arise if it has an accepted place within an accepted pattern.

Even here, however, there is a real danger of lack of balance in undue emphasis on the points of the Quadrilateral, and Anglicans ought not to assume that the fact that the four are accepted implies that others share the view that they are the four essential pillars. Any such selection brings the danger of bias, and we can hardly exonerate the Anglican emphasis from blame for the quite dishearteningly disproportionate amount of labour that has been expended on questions of the ordained ministry in negotiations for Church Union. Dr. Kraemer in his recent book on *A Theology of the Laity*<sup>6</sup> is only one of many able men who have found this disproportion deeply regrettable. The Quadrilateral does not give us a full or balanced picture of the Church: The Church of South India has attempted a revised Formula to correct its failure to emphasize the fellowship of the Church or the place of the whole membership in its outgoing ministry (cf. Ward: *Outlines of Christian Theology*,<sup>7</sup> II, p. 124). In the North India *Plan of Union* many would point to certain notable features which in no way derive from the Quadrilateral, but which are felt to be most important, for example the place given in it to the local church as the embodiment in its own area of the Church Catholic, and the forthright statement on the ministry of the whole Church, which sets in the forefront the part of every member both in the worship of God and in the manifold service which the Church must render.

---

<sup>6</sup> Lutterworth, 1958. See pp. 82, 161, etc.

<sup>7</sup> C.L.S., Madras, 1955.

It is rather disheartening to find how little recognition seems to have been given in many Anglican circles to this broader emphasis. One example may illustrate this point. Lambeth 1958 has made an encouraging statement concerning the fact that the Church of North India and the Church of Lanka will continue to be in communion with non-episcopal churches. In doing so, however, it states that this will be after the whole ministry of these Churches 'has been episcopally united' (Res. 21). This odd phrase, of course, reveals the assumption that the crucial thing is to satisfy the Lambeth Quadrilateral. It shows a singular lack of sensitiveness to the fact that the proposed form of unification, at least in North India, has been patiently worked out so as to treat all the ministries on a precisely equal basis and to express the avowed, common purpose of seeking humbly from God His blessing for the ministers (*Plan of Union II*, VII, 14). It would be just as appropriate to say that the ministry will be 'presbyterially united' as to use Lambeth's phrase, and, while certainly room is left for those who wish to use it, the very fact that the Conference seems to have assumed it was the proper phrase simply reveals the fact that it is still far too bound by the narrow limitations of a particular formula. Perhaps these points do not greatly matter, for in fact the Plans of Union far transcend the Quadrilateral, nevertheless they point to a defective understanding of what is being done which can be harmful and the decision of 1958 to reiterate the 'Quadrilateral' is not reassuring.

## V

(2) It is when the formula comes to be used as a kind of ready-made footrule by which to determine whether or not other bodies are fully part of the Catholic Church, that a much graver danger arises. It is true that recent Anglican statements have tended to be in line with the hopeful opinion of the Lambeth Committee in 1958 that 'the Anglican churches ought to be ready to recognize the Presbyterian Churches as true parts of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church, and that the spiritual effectiveness of their ministerial orders ought not to be implicitly or explicitly questioned'.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, when the same Report goes on to declare that 'fully reciprocal intercommunion' cannot be envisaged 'at any point short of the adoption of episcopacy by the churches of Presbyterian Order',<sup>9</sup> to most observers there is an implied questioning which nullifies the previous statement. And here we must reckon with the practice of Anglican churches which constantly seems to imply a judgement on the place of non-episcopal churches within the Church Catholic. How else can we understand the constantly repeated experience at inter-denominational gatherings, even those which are negotiating

---

<sup>8</sup> Report of Lambeth, 1958, pp. 2, 43.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 2, 44.



Union, at which Anglican priests find it necessary to hold aloof from a Communion service unless it be conducted by one of themselves? How else can we read the requirement that even a person who for decades has been a confirmed communicant member of the Church must be confirmed afresh by a Bishop before he can be received as a regular communicant in the Anglican fellowship? How else can we understand the guidance to Anglican families living in the heart of a great area, even a whole country, where the Church is of another tradition, that they may share in other Christian fellowship but must refrain from Communion except when a priest of their own persuasion can at rare intervals minister to them? In face of these familiar experiences we are not convinced, even if the Archbishop of Canterbury is correctly reported<sup>10</sup> as having made the following statement in his opening sermon at Minneapolis at the Pan-Anglican gathering of 1954:

Though our conception of truth still limits our freedom in regard to sacramental relations with other communions of Christendom, we gladly believe that Christ is as really present with them in their observance of His Sacraments as He is with us in ours. We all receive Him in our Sacraments . . .

If this is true, then in all earnestness we must ask, why hold aloof in circumstances like those listed above? Is Christ divided? One must submit that, if the statement just quoted represents genuine Anglican conviction, then it is most urgently necessary for the Anglican churches to rethink their attitude to Intercommunion. Unfortunately the continuing practice seems much more consistent with the opinion bluntly expressed by Darwell Stone:

As the necessities of material elements, so also there is the necessity of the minister, the priest episcopally ordained. Without these there is not the guarantee of the Church, without these there is not the sacrament.<sup>11</sup>

The practice is all too familiar, and on all hands is evidence that Anglicans offer the historic episcopate as the gift which will end such discrimination. This is the burden of Dr. Fisher's famous 'Cambridge Sermon' of 1948 in which he invited others to 'take episcopacy into their system'. This is the implication of the Ceylon *Plan of Union* which Lambeth has so heartily approved, containing the remarkable proposal that its ministry should be authorized by an episcopate consecrated by visiting Bishops from other churches, who will apparently be able to pass on the essential gift before returning to their own churches which are not actually involved in the Union. This is the implication of the proposal for 'Bishops in Presbytery' in the

---

<sup>10</sup> By *The Presbyterian Herald* (Belfast).

<sup>11</sup> In *Episcopacy Ancient and Modern*, p. 381.

Church of Scotland which was the very corner-stone of the recommendations of the Joint Committee, since Anglicans had made it so clear that without Bishops there could not be full intercommunion.<sup>12</sup> Is it not also the implication of Lambeth's desire to revise the proposed method of unification in North India, the outcome of years of patient labour, in order to secure a procedure that would first of all provide Bishops fully commissioned in the Church?

There is no need to labour the evidence. With all their acknowledgement of God's manifest blessing on others, the Anglican Communion still surveys the world like a kind of ecumenical inspector, holding fast the 'Quadrilateral' as the sure standard by which to test the credentials of others. If they have the historic episcopate, there is a 'guarantee' and all is well, if they do not then there is such uncertainty as to whether or not they can celebrate the Sacraments at all that it is the path of wisdom to keep aloof from Sacramental fellowship with them. This means that, relying on the authority of their formula, Anglicans have actually passed from a positive witness to the values which they find in the historic episcopate to a grave negative judgement (sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit) on others. To those who find themselves led to lay such exclusive stress on 'possession of the historic episcopate' (Lambeth 1958, Res. 16) as the key to fellowship among Churches, one cannot but exclaim, 'Your God is too small', and to those who hope to continue to play a part in the healing of the divisions of the Church, would address an urgent plea for a rethinking of their attitude and practice in this respect.

There is another aspect of danger in this emphasis on 'possession' of the elements of the Quadrilateral, especially of the historic episcopate as a 'guarantee' of the Church, to use Darwell Stone's expression. The conception jeopardizes the evangelical truth of the Gospel of grace which never can be 'guaranteed' by external means in our control. The related concept of 'validity', so often cited in this context, is legalistic and singularly inappropriate in relation to the Gospel. The prophetic protest, 'Are ye not as the children of the Ethiopians unto me? said the LORD' (Am. 9:9) is not yet irrelevant, nor is the Baptist's sharp reminder that God can raise up from the stones children to Abraham (Matt. 3:9). It was to His own followers that our Lord had to say, 'When ye shall have done all the things that are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants' (Luke 17:10). We do not secure a claim upon our Lord by our correct orders. This is not that we call in question the sacred duty to strive to maintain proper order in the House of God; but it is to realize that, if we turn our claim to have been successful here into the ground of our assurance, then we have turned afresh to a religion of legalism. One may quote words already used in a discussion

---

<sup>12</sup> Report, op. cit., pp. 24-25.

of one attempt to achieve understanding (*Anglican and Presbyterian relations*) in which these ideas played a large part:

By pinpointing the lack of the historic episcopate, the Report accords to this a significance out of all proportion to failures in charity, the loss of the Church's sense of mission, disloyalty to the truth, the failure of the Church's ministry when the hungry sheep have looked up unfed, and the acts of tyranny which have driven many from the fold . . . it pinpoints the lack of the historic episcopate, this, one, debated point of difference, and thus implies that loss of episcopacy was the one really mortal error in the Church, the setting right of which will in itself suffice to open the door of hope. This is to treat the grace of God as if it were a commodity in our control. There is a failure of seriousness here which challenges the very Gospel itself.<sup>13</sup>

It is the emphasis which Lambeth has laid on this aspect, this corporate assumption of being in the true succession which, by reaction, has led others to put forward similar claims. In their indignation at the implied judgement on their orders, these come to demand that their own credentials should be equally honoured. In consequence the ecumenical debate on Faith and Order pitifully recreates the scene in the Upper Room where the disciples, on the eve of Calvary, disputed as to which one should be the greatest. Is not the answer to the whole argument the reminder that: . . . in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision; but faith working through love (Gal. 5:6).

\* \* \*

In the labour of preparation for the united Church for which we all long, the Anglican Church has much to offer of things which in its rich experience have proved precious. There are few who know anything of its great heritage and contribution to Christian life and thought who do not sincerely desire that it should be able to bring that heritage fully into union with others. None can question the responsibility of those who represent that Church to endeavour to ensure that the way is fully open for them to give their contribution in its integrity.

But this does not grant them immunity from the grave dangers involved when they are tempted to make it a very condition for the acceptance of those whom they recognize as their brethren in Christ that they should agree first to seek reformation of their ways according to the Anglican pattern. To strive thus to 'establish one's own righteousness' in this time of our pilgrimage, when at the best 'we know in part' is to fall into the serious peril of missing the 'righteousness of God'. It is particularly in this context that one must express the lively hope that the 'Quadrilateral' will be radically rethought in the light of all that has been shown to the Churches through the years, and in the light of the Gospel itself.

---

<sup>13</sup> W. Stewart, *A North Indian Comment . . .*, Edinburgh, 1958.