

UNITY AND DIVERSITY IN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

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The theme is fundamental to our common concern. The vastness of the subject and the limited extent of the time available make it especially important to say, at the beginning, what this paper is - and just as important, what it is not! It is an examination of the basic issues which confront theologians of every tendency and tradition when they attempt to write some kind of systematic theology. Now that traditional denominational labels have lost much of their earlier importance it has become necessary for theologians, even those writing from a particular confessional standpoint, to give adequate consideration to other viewpoints and methods. In this respect, the ecumenical movement has become a practical reality for all of us, and so too has the need to understand more clearly the lines of convergence and divergence which bind us to, and separate us from, other theological endeavours. On the other hand, this paper is not a model theological system, and for that reason, a good many things have been left out. In particular, relatively little will be said about the ecclesiological differences which so obviously separate Christians from one another. This is not because I think such differences do not matter, but because from the purely theological standpoint, they are often of secondary importance. In many cases, they are also far too complex, requiring treatment too detailed to fit readily into the dimensions of a paper such as this one.

The first imperative for any discussion of this subject is the need to define what the current situation is. Next we shall look at the relationship between what is and what ought to be, allowing of course for the presupposition and outlook which are bound to govern one's assessment of this ideal. Thirdly, we shall have to consider the limits of what is tolerable within the Christian church as a whole and what is simply un-Christian. Fourthly, we shall look at what might be tolerable within a given sub-

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system of Christian theology but need not be accepted by all Christians – indeed, may not be acceptable to them, assuming that they have developed another sub-system in which a particular formulation is uncongenial. It will be obvious from the start that in many ways it is this fourth area which raises the greater possibilities for dissent, since one of the major issues of our time is whether a particular sub-system can claim universal (and probably also exclusive) validity, or whether it is necessary to accept that current Christian theology is fundamentally a grouping of sub-systems which can possibly be transcended but which can never be merged into a single whole.

Synchronic and Diachronic

Turning then, first of all, to the current situation, we have to say that systematic theology today has to respond to two competing, though not always equally powerful, pressures, which can be called respectively the synchronic and the diachronic (or in simpler language, the contemporary and the historical). Of the two, the diachronic is obviously the more rooted, the more institutional. The churches, denominations and spiritual movements to which theologians today belong are all the products of historical development. Often they bear witness to this in confessional documents which enshrine one particular tradition, or perhaps a compromise between particular traditions, and the contemporary systematic theologian is obliged to acknowledge this fact, whether by commitment, criticism or outright opposition to his own confessional heritage.

The synchronic pressure is very different. Often more dynamic and attractive than the diachronic, it moves in the direction of relevance, simplicity and unity. It may not be ecumenical in any formal sense, but it is certainly ecumenical in practice, a tendency which is bound to work against the rigid confessionalism of an earlier era. The latter has not disappeared, but under the impact of synchronic pressures, the concept of confession has given way to tradition, that of

denomination to identity - influential and valuable things, but things which are seen primarily in a relative context of mutually co-existing sub-cultures which are or can be united by a deeper set of factors. This viewpoint, incidentally, is found among both liberals and conservatives in the modern church. Indeed, one might even say that the chief difference between the liberal and the conservative is that the liberal generally derives his basis of unity from synchronic elements, whilst the conservative generally derives it from diachronic ones. Liberal unity thus involves a common outlook on the world which may well owe much of its essence to non-Christian factors; conservative unity looks back to a time before the emergence of separate theological traditions and tends to be expressed more in the mutual confession of doctrines and adoption of practices common to the early church as a whole. In terms of historical theology, the liberal typically emphasizes the period since Schleiermacher; the conservative, the period before Chalcedon. Intervening eras - the Middle Ages, or the Reformation - remain the preserve of those conservatives who have not been seriously affected by the synchronic pressures of our time. Occasionally they may even be people who by education or temperament do not accept that there are today synchronic pressures widely different from the diachronic ones, and as a result they may continue to develop and proclaim a particular theological tradition as a viable option in contemporary society. But although such people can claim the weight of history on their side, they are now generally dismissed as reactionaries by the mainline churches and, among the younger generation at least, relegated to the sectarian fringe.

This, then, is the situation in the church today. But is it necessarily what should be? Apart from a small minority of *laissez-faire*, don't-rock-the-boat types, many of whom understandably go far up the ecclesiastical careers ladder, most thinking theologians would answer in the negative. The difficulty of course, is that the motives which prompt this negativeness are very different in each case. Some are impatient with the residual power of diachronic pressures and

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want to see them disappear as fast as possible. The charismatic and renewal movements act as a powerful solvent of tradition, because even though the content of their faith may in some respects appear to be arch-conservative, it is also almost entirely non-reflective, and therefore easily disregarded. A simple example of this is the well-known fact that charismatic or renewed Protestants are almost always happy, even eager, to co-operate in every way with Roman Catholics of a similar type, and that both are negative towards the more conventionally traditionalist members of their own denominations, in spite of their formal theological agreement with them.

On the other hand, there are those who seek a renewed confessionalism, a return to the diachronic pressures which continue to be felt in the churches. These people demand a stricter adherence to official confessions of faith, and may even seek to exclude others, not only from their fellowship but from the wider church. In normal times, these people are neither very numerous nor very articulate, but they come into their own when something extraordinary occurs - for example, when the Bishop of Durham appears to deny the virgin birth and resurrection of Christ. Then it becomes clear that they have a latent strength beyond their apparent numbers, and that the synchronic pressure groups are rather flabby or elitist by comparison.

A third group, to which theologically-minded conservative Evangelicals usually seem to belong, want to preserve some kind of balance between the synchronic and the diachronic. 'Balanced Christianity' has frequently been criticised for being more interested in balance than in Christianity, but it would perhaps be fairer to suggest that it is a poor solution to an admittedly difficult problem, because the synchronic and diachronic pressures which it seeks to match are different from each other in kind. They cannot be held together in balance because they are not mutually complementary. In practice every theologian responds more readily to one of them, and in the light of that response, formulates an attitude to the other

derived not from it but from the approach to which he is already committed. In extreme cases, outlined above, this may mean almost total rejection of the other, but more often it becomes a selective acceptance of what the other has to offer. Thus a conservative traditionalist will be constrained to relate his views to those of the wider church, and to its needs today, whilst the liberal may have to acquiesce, more or less willingly, in the classical symbolism and liturgy which have always defined Christian and denominational identity. He may seek to alter them by judicial means, but usually he will be content to live with freedom of interpretation - much to the chagrin of conservatives!

In trying to decide which of these pressures should be allowed to form the basic framework for a systematic theology, it is necessary to look at their respective merits. The synchronic pressure is a very attractive one, because it affects us all, wherever we come from, it belongs to our time and therefore appears to be novel and original - qualities which are virtuous in our society - and because, after all, we cannot escape them for long if we want to live in our own time. The danger is that those who succumb to them are liable to display a kind of zeal without knowledge, enthusiasm unencumbered by the experience of history and probably not interested in it. The diachronic pressure, on the other hand, gives its adherents knowledge, though it may come with or without zeal. Although we must deplore the latter, we ought to recognise it as a perversion, a scandal - *corruptio optimi pessima* - not as inherent in the diachronic option. In spite of the attractions of the synchronic option, I believe that the historical character of revelation forces us to prefer the diachronic one, because only with knowledge are we equipped to judge and control the spiritual forces of our age.

This of course brings us to the third point. If the diachronic approach is preferable overall, how far can it bend to accommodate various synchronic pressures? I have already indicated that a total merger is impossible, but a total rejection of

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the one is impracticable since, like it or not, we are compelled to live in our own time and cannot return to the securities of an imaginary past. We are then left with the boundaries of permissible selection, which so far have never been properly defined. We can be fairly certain that traditional language, formulae and rites will be maintained. Generally speaking, the closer one gets to the man in the pew the more traditional theological expression will be. Recent experience has shown that radical change at the popular level is only possible when the man in the pew has little power - or when the pew is empty. Surveys in England have shown that non-churchgoers generally resent the recent changes in the liturgy and prefer traditional weddings and funerals. Certainly it will be a long time before 'thee' and 'thou' disappear from *Songs of Praise*. The BBC, unlike the church, knows all about audience ratings!

Of course, it is also true that the higher one's personal commitment becomes, the more likely one is to look for radical change, especially if the starting point of one's faith was well outside the bounds of the church and one's progress has remained impervious to theological instruction. But no theologian can be content to rest his case on popular piety alone, if only because a major part of his task is to inform that piety and give it deep and lasting roots in the Word of God. The theologian is left then with a somewhat ambiguous attitude towards practical change of a liturgical or stylistic nature, where individual taste is likely to be at least as influential as theological conviction. And this of course, is a problem. For to what extent is it possible to alter details of ritual and not change the theology thus represented? To appeal to the practice of the Reformers in this matter merely highlights the difficulty. They introduced radical changes, not because they liked change, but because they had a new theology which needed to express itself. In other words, the changes of the Reformation did not come mainly from synchronic pressures outside the church, but from diachronic pressures resulting from the rediscovery of a forgotten message. Where this rediscovery did not take place, synchronic pressures, which at the time of the Renaissance

operated in favour of an open Bible and a vernacular liturgy, were actually resisted with considerable success.

The modern susceptibility to synchronic pressures is therefore not a new Reformation but quite a different phenomenon. At the most serious level, it can be seen in the widespread surrender of modern theology to the secular philosopher of the age. It may be objected that Schleiermacher's adoption of Kant is really no different from Aquinas' adoption of Aristotle, or Augustine's predilection for Neoplatonism. But against this is the intriguing fact that St. Thomas' Aristotelianism and Augustine's Neoplatonism have been a problem only since the time of Schleiermacher. Before then, not even Luther or Calvin noticed the philosophical background of the classical theologians, whom they certainly did not despise as being corrupt. The theological degeneration of the post-apostolic, or even of the post-Easter church was a discovery of the nineteenth century which was only possible because that century was in revolt against the diachronic pressures which were then felt to be constricting theological development. For the first time, *Histories of Dogma* were written, giving a detailed outline of this process, and ending inevitably with the Reformation which was regarded as both the last phase of dogmatic development and the beginning of a new wave of freedom which after three centuries would liberate the church from dogma altogether.

The synchronic pressures of the time were made the basis of the theological agenda - evolution, progress, natural science and so on. When, as was inevitable, the church which was wedded to the spirit of the nineteenth century became widowed in the twentieth, a new and more flexible liberalism appeared. Synchronic pressures continued to dominate the theological agenda, but now they were conditioned by a new awareness of built-in obsolescence. Today the theologians of liberation, feminism, ecology and so on know they are not writing for eternity. Their sole aim is to achieve the academic equivalent of box-office success right now. John Robinson's *Honest to God*, for example, has been translated into as many languages

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and sold about as many copies as Calvin's *Institutes*, but whilst the former is already dated and going out of print, the latter continues to be read and printed much as it always has been.

Of course, modern theologians of Robinson's type select from the synchronic range of pressures available, and achieve notoriety by focusing on one or two particularly hot topics. In this climate, a theological synthesis is neither possible nor desirable, since such an achievement would greatly reduce the opportunities for making more money from a scandalized public. As a result they never get beyond soundings, explorations in theology and calls for reconstruction which, if they were ever answered, would be the death of their own mini growth industry.

The diachronically-based theologian must inevitably reject all behaviour of this kind, both because it is dilletantish and because it is un-Christian in its inspiration, for the process of selection extends also to historical tradition and the canonical texts, both of which are perverted in the interests of the dominant synchronic pressure. The diachronic theologian must preserve the integrity of both Scripture and tradition and respond to synchronic pressures by applying this integral understanding in a manner which is appropriate to the circumstances. His first task must be criticism of the present age in the light of the past; what is selected for inclusion in the ongoing tradition will be what has survived this searing investigation. In the nature of things it is not likely to be such, since few centuries leave any really large legacy behind them and the twentieth, which by all accounts appears to be an age of spiritual decline, may well be poorer than most. In the broad sweep of Christian tradition therefore, *sub specie aeternitatis* the church can only tolerate and absorb what is compatible with its own nature, a fact which at the present time is more likely to appear as a rejection of most, if not all, contemporary theological writing.

There is however, a fourth question which also must be asked, because of its bearing on the present situation. Is it possible to

tolerate within the church, sub-systems of theology which may belong to particular groups or denominations but not to the whole? If it is, should we not view modern attempts to construct a basically synchronic, tolerant pluralism as the beginning of yet another sub-system which may one day take its place alongside the rest, or even be the model for a non-confessional, universal tradition of the future?

Traditions and Divisions

From the diachronic point of view, the different traditions of Christian theology developed out of disagreements which came to a head at particular moments in church history, when conflicting groups took different roads. The point at which they both intersect and divide is invariably the doctrine of the Trinity. All Christians are united because they confess the same trinitarian God and at the same time they are divided because they confess him in a different way - not at the level of liturgical practice only, but more importantly, at the level of doctrinal understanding. This can be illustrated by looking at the progress of the Christian church. Until the time of the Council of Chalcedon in 451, there was one church and one theology, deviations from which were carefully noted and condemned. At Chalcedon, the one true church broke up over the question, not of Christ's divinity but of his humanity. Nevertheless, because, as the Athanasian Creed puts it, Christ by his incarnation took manhood into God, this Christological issue became a theological question. The Chalcedonian Definition was a middle way between Nestorianism and Monophysitism drawn up by men who believed they were expressing the orthodox tradition of the one true church. But despite the anathemas, these movements continued to flourish and still exist - out of communion with the other churches, but not condemned by them, in the way that Unitarianism and Mormonism are. Even in ancient times there were attempts at reunion, and the schism did not become final until the Third Council of Constantinople in 680-681.

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The next division occurred in the Middle Ages, and concerned the procession of the Holy Spirit. The actual controversy began in the ninth century and was not finally concluded until the fifteenth - nearly six centuries later - but in spite of the many other factors which complicated the situation, the main outlines of the debate are clearly discernible. The third great division occurred in the sixteenth century, and concerned the work of the Holy Spirit above all else. It began with Luther's protest in 1517 and was complete at the latest by the end of the Council of Trent in 1563, though it took another century for its implications to be fully worked out.

In looking back over these divisions, two things are immediately apparent. The first is that they have occurred historically in an order which involves an ever narrower aspect of trinitarian theology. A refusal to believe in the Trinity itself is enough to produce a separate religion; a difference over the person of Christ puts both his work and the question of the Holy Spirit out of sight and a difference over the person of the Holy Spirit is enough to make the subsequent debates about his work seem incomprehensible. It is interesting to notice in this connection that although Protestants tend to regard Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox as virtually interchangeable because of their liturgical practices and ecclesiology (though they are by no means the same!), the Eastern Orthodox often see no real difference between Protestants and Roman Catholics, because they have no frame of reference in which to situate the arguments of the Reformation.

It is a paradox that differences which are closest to home and of least theological significance should be the ones which are most keenly felt. Protestants are generally much more anti-Catholic than anti-Orthodox, and it would be hard to find anybody who is anti-Nestorian or anti-Monophysite, even though on purely theological grounds there is much more reason to be such than to be anti-Catholic.

Another important point is that the divisions which have occurred were the result of long debate during the course of which the issues involved were fully aired. This has often been forgotten in the modern ecumenical movement, which sometimes pretends that theological traditions are so different now because they have evolved in isolation from one another. On the contrary, it is historically certain that they developed most rapidly in the glare of intense debate. When that cooled off and isolation was imposed, either by Islam or by the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio*, the different traditions fossilized and died. This happened to Protestant Orthodoxy in the seventeenth century when it was cut off from debate with Roman Catholicism, and the resulting stagnation paved the way for an abandonment of orthodoxy altogether when the new debating partner was Enlightenment rationalism, not the Church of Rome.

All this inevitably leads us to view theological sub-systems in a rather different light. They are not merely different ways of looking at the same thing; they have their origins in real debates which have taken place within the context of trinitarian theology. These debates were about issues which are still alive and about which one must still take a position, if one is truly trinitarian. It is because this perspective has been lost that it has become possible to regard the different traditions which have emerged from them as no more than regional or cultural variants of a single reality. Furthermore, it is only because modern theologians have so often abandoned the diachronic perspective that they have been able to ignore debates in trinitarian theology and have thought it possible to reconstruct a synchronic unity on the basis of a fundamental belief in the Trinity itself. To understand why this is impossible we must look more carefully at the precise points where the different traditions converge and diverge, for only in that way can we appreciate the logic which keeps them all alive, but apart.

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Unifying Factors

We come first of all to the unifying factors, which are basically three: first, the belief in a trinitarian God; second, the belief in the divinity of Jesus Christ; and third, the belief in the divine inspiration and central importance of Holy Scripture. Every authentic Christian theological tradition accepts these three key points. The last has been a matter of controversy and needs to be phrased carefully, but we must bear in mind that what we are agreed on is the nature of Scripture, not the scope of its authority, which in Catholic and Orthodox traditions is circumscribed, or supplemented, by other considerations.

It should also be pointed out that the inspiration of Scripture is a trinitarian question, not only because it is our only source for the doctrines of the Trinity, nor only because inspiration is the work of the Holy Spirit but also, and especially, because it is the Word of God, and the Word of God is Jesus Christ himself. The inspiration of Scripture is parallel to the incarnation of Christ, and the main lines of argument which appear in Christology are valid also for the doctrine of Scripture which is indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

It always seems difficult to talk at length about things of which we are agreed, but in fact there is a good deal to be said about the unifying factors in Christian theology. First of all, they are a good deal more restrictive than the kind of unity which James Dunn, for example, says was the norm in the early church. No Christian body today would accept that the mere confession 'Jesus is Lord' provides an adequate theological base, and every major church body subscribes to a series of beliefs which are not only more precise and more comprehensive than this, but which are held in common by all other major church bodies. This is highly significant because it shows that there is a Christian identity which transcends denominational barriers and which is sufficiently developed as a theological system to provide a common framework of discourse within which the different Christian traditions can function. It may be true that

no one tradition can be reduced to the common core material, but nor may it be regarded as no more than a point of view, or a way of receiving the common core. All traditions have extended and extrapolated from the common heritage in one way or another, but at the same time they have remained firmly rooted in the common core in a way which has made continuing dialogue and cross-fertilization possible. No doubt, as we hinted earlier, this very closeness has also had the opposite effect at times, by sharpening an awareness of differences and aggravating their impact on the church.

Nevertheless, the unifying factors in Christian theology retain their fundamental importance and provide a solid basis both for ecumenical discussion and for the further elaboration of existing traditions. If the latter are in some sense sub-systems of the whole, they are not fragments which have broken off the common core, or have simply dissolved the common core into nothing. It is therefore wrong to imagine that the proper response to the synchronic pressure for unity is to devise schemes for putting Humpty Dumpty together again, since such schemes are working with the wrong model in the first place. It is much better to think in terms of a branch-theory like the one put forward by Anglo-Catholics in the last century, but shorn of their particular bias. The trunk of the tree from which the branches have sprung cannot be equated either with the church of Rome or with the church of the early Christian centuries. It is not ecclesiological, but doctrinal, and the unity of the early church, such as it was, was only a unity on the fundamentals of the faith, which had to be clarified and protected against non-Christian pressures at work both within and without the body of the church. It also needs to be emphasized that if the church is like a tree, then the trunk and the branches will grow *together* but in different ways. The trunk will become more solid and more rooted in the soil in which it is planted, but its growth will be slow and be visible only over a period of time. The branches, on the other hand, will spread out and develop at a rate which is visibly faster, but which is always carefully balanced by the capacity of the trunk to support it.

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Furthermore, if this model is accepted, it will be apparent that the ecumenical interest of the various branches will lie in making sure that nobody lays an axe to the root of the tree, for all will derive equal and essential nourishment from it. Naturally, this will have a considerable effect on the synchronic pressures for unity which govern official ecumenical discussion. These want to achieve unity by abolishing the branches by reintegrating them into the trunk of the tree. Modern ecumenism can accept cultural or regional diversity, but not ethological differences, which it regards as sapping the strength of the primordial trunk. Few stop to think that if this project were ever to be completed, the result would look more like a telegraph pole than a tree - or perhaps like a dead stump from which the branches have fallen off.

Not all proponents of modern ecumenism are theologically liberal, but that the two can go easily together is obvious, for a reduction of the branches to the trunk of the tree involves a deformation of the trunk. In the utilitarian, telegraph-pole model, which is peculiarly appropriate to a technological age, this deformation is also, necessarily, an uprooting of the tree from its native soil and its artificial planting, without roots, in a new and alien environment. This is what the liberal, synchronic pressures of our time are trying to achieve, and it is against this that the branches of the tree are called to struggle. We need to do this by emphasizing that the unity we have with other Christian traditions is present already, it does not have to be constructed or invented. We also need to stress that the healthiest way to promote it is to maintain and extend our diversity, drawing always on a common source and possibly becoming entwined with other branches at different points along the way, but never losing the strength or individuality which gives each branch its particular beauty and importance.

If this perspective can be communicated to the Evangelical world it may have the double effect of opening it to the influence

of other Christian traditions without in any way minimizing or detracting from its own integrity and purpose.

Divisive Factors

Having established both the importance and the possible role of the unifying factors in Christian theology, we are now compelled to take a closer look at the things which divide us. At the lowest level of the tree-trunk, if we stick to that image, there are the branches which have gone their own way because of differences concerning the person and work of Jesus Christ. Neither the Nestorians nor the Monophysites were able to hold the divinity and the humanity of Jesus in the proper balance, even though both were motivated in this by a concern, shared with the great church, that the work of Christ should be preserved in its fulness. The branches were therefore formed by people whose heart was in the right place but who, for that very reason, felt compelled to take a different direction in theology. Nestorianism, which overemphasizes the humanity of Christ, is the exact counterpart of Monophysitism, which overemphasizes his divinity - the two branches counterbalance each other.

In the early centuries, when they were virtually the only branches which existed, they developed and prospered but, as so often happens with the lower branches of a tree, they gradually stopped growing and even began to shed some of their fruit. They were near enough to the ground to be an easy target for non-Christian predators, and both succumbed to the pressures of Islam. Today, though they still exist, they are but a shadow of their former selves, and are as susceptible to outside pressures as they have ever been.

Farther up the tree we come to the first major split in the trunk itself - that which occurred over the question of the procession of the Holy Spirit. To many people this may appear to be less important than the earlier Christological controversies, but in fact it is more serious than they were. In the earlier case, the

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substance of the matter was agreed on all sides, and only the formulations differed. In the dispute about the procession of the Holy Spirit the substance itself was a matter of controversy, which even an agreed formulation, like that of the Council of Florence in 1439, could do nothing to overcome. This needs to be said with great clarity, because one of the major problems which confronts students of the *Filioque* dispute today is the common conviction among western scholars - most, but not all of them liberals - that it is a debate about words which has no substance. On the contrary, it is in fact a major cleavage which has repercussions at every level of church life. The reason for this is simply that the Holy Spirit is the founder of the church and the person of the Trinity most directly involved in its preservation on earth. It is not too much to say that in a very real sense, he is our contact-point with God. It is he who makes our adoption as sons in Christ a reality, and he who empowers us to pray to the Father.

It is therefore of crucial importance for us to know just how he is related to the two persons whom he unites us with, since we can scarcely be united with them in a way which is different from his union with them. The Western Church argues that the Holy Spirit is related equally and in the same way to both the Father and the Son. The Eastern Church argues that the Holy Spirit is related to the Father in a way which is more fundamental than his relationship to the Son, but leaves open the question of what the latter relationship consists in. This difference of theology is bound to have its effect on the life of the church, especially when the work of the Holy Spirit is being considered. Time and again we discover that differences which have occurred within the Western Church on this issue simply have no counterpart in the Eastern Church, and Eastern theologians are often at a loss to understand what the problems are. Many see little difference between Protestants and Catholics, because they have divided from the Western Church *as a whole* and therefore tend to perceive it as a unity even today. This is one reason why Protestants and Orthodox, in spite of many shared beliefs, particularly with regard to the

Roman Church and its authority, have never moved closer to one another in practical terms.

It is interesting to note that the split in the Western Church did not begin until the split between East and West had become definitive; indeed, the two events are almost contemporaneous. Curiously enough, the same was also true of the beginning of the East-West split, which followed hard on the final separation of Nestorians and Monophysites. It is almost as if there is a pause for breath when each split is consummated, before the continuing process of division begins again.

In any event, the sixteenth-century split between Protestants and Roman Catholics occurred primarily over issues which are directly linked to the work of the Holy Spirit. It is one of the curiosities of theological history that this simple fact is seldom correctly perceived, even by those who are most familiar with the subject. Depending on who you ask, the explanation which will be given for the Reformation will range from the corruption of the medieval church, to the rediscovery of the doctrine of justification by faith alone, the rejection of papal authority and the claims of Renaissance science. Of course, all these factors were involved, but what gives coherence to the movement as a whole is the understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit – a fact which is borne out by countless Reformation treatises on that subject, and by the fact – which seems slightly curious to our generation – that no less a figure than Calvin himself has always been known as the theologian of the Holy Spirit.

If we return to popular impressions as given above, what do we find when we apply this principle? First, we discover that the church, in the mind of the Reformers, is the invisible community of the Spirit rather than the visible body of Christ. It is the confirmation of Pentecost, not the incarnation, as Roman Catholic ecclesiology likes to have it. A Catholic can say, as many have in fact said, that the Son of God came to earth and *left behind* the church; a Protestant would say that the

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Son of God ascended into heaven and sent his Holy Spirit to create the church – a rather different thing!

In the matter of justification by faith alone we are really dealing with the broader issue of how the Spirit works in the life of the believer. The Catholic argues that it is by mediated grace, possessed and conveyed by the church with its priests and sacraments. The Protestant argues that it is by immediate grace; the Holy Spirit speaks directly to our hearts, giving us the faith to believe that we have been justified by Christ's atoning sacrifice. In both ways of thinking, grace is a work of the Holy Spirit, but in the Catholic scheme the Spirit first sanctifies *things* – water, bread and wine – which are then applied to *people*, whereas in the Protestant case, the Holy Spirit sanctifies only people. The outward signs, though important and helpful, possess no virtue in and of themselves.

The people-centred, rather than thing-centred emphasis of Protestantism can be seen right across the whole spectrum of devotional life. Protestants put preaching the gospel before all else, and reject extreme forms of sacramental piety. Protestants emphasize the importance of individual witness, whereas Roman Catholics stress the corporate dimension, as in the so-called religious life. Protestants emphasize the responsibility which each Christian has in the sight of God; Roman Catholics interpose the ministry of a confessor-priest, not as is often thought, in his individual capacity, but as the voice of the church (which is why such efforts are made to preserve the anonymity of the confessional), and so on. Enough has been said to give the general gist of the argument.

As for the papacy, the difference of opinion begins with the simple question – who is the vicar of Christ on earth? For Roman Catholics, the answer is obvious – the pope. For Protestants, the answer is equally obvious – the Holy Spirit, that other Comforter whom the Father has sent in Christ's name. The question of authority, or jurisdiction, naturally flows from this. Protestant churches recognize only the

authority of the Holy Spirit, as this has been revealed in the Scriptures. Roman Catholics accept that the Bible is a book inspired by the Holy Spirit, but place their authority in the pope, who has the right to make infallible doctrinal pronouncements which may or may not have scriptural support. In case of doubt, moreover, it is the word of the pope, not that of the Bible, which takes precedence. In this context, it should be said that many people argue that Roman authority really resides in the church, of which the pope is only the privileged spokesman. That was certainly the legal position until 1870, and since Vatican II it has been revived by many ecumenically-minded Catholics. Yet the fact of the matter is that the papacy continues to extend its very unique authority, and that many Catholics look to it to enforce or correct the teaching of the Church given by other bodies, such as councils and papal commissions. This authority has recently been powerfully supported by the mass-media, where the pope inevitably steals the show. In a very real sense, therefore, the position of the vicar of Christ has been greatly reinforced in modern Catholicism, and this is the logical extension of earlier tendencies. It is also the logical counterpart of *sola Scriptura*, sometimes disparagingly – but not altogether inaccurately – referred to as a 'paper pope' by those who would prefer to dispense with its authority altogether. Here as elsewhere, we must see beyond the smokescreen of ecumenical propaganda and consider what the reality is – something very different indeed from what most people imagine!

Lastly, there is the question of Renaissance science. Rome silenced Galileo and later tried to resurrect the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas as its guiding light in the modern world. The general result of its efforts has been academic stagnation, even in theology, from which only secularization and Protestant influence have rescued it. The Reformers, on the other hand, generally welcomed the new learning because they believed that the Holy Spirit could, and did, speak to man outside the bounds of the worship of the visible church. They declared that secular callings were holy, that a scientist engaged in research was

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uncovering the secret beauty of God's own handiwork. If it is true that they sometimes had a naive faith in scientists which was readily shattered when the latter turned out to be heretics and unbelievers in large numbers, this too must be explained primarily by their failure to apply their principle that the Holy Spirit works in *people*, not in things or theories, to the realm of science and the other secular callings. In our own time, when we have proved that the devil can use technology to great effect, this truth is slowly and painfully being rediscovered – we can only hope, before it is too late!

This, then, is a brief sketch of the Protestant-Roman Catholic theological divide. Within the Protestant world there are further divisions, though as I said at the beginning of this paper, these tend to be ecclesiological rather than theological – a direction which makes sense in the context of Protestant teaching about the work of the Spirit, in which ecclesiastical structures are often thought to be of secondary importance. Indeed, it is highly significant that the modern ecumenical movement began as a Protestant, spiritual attempt to achieve unity above and beyond denominational barriers. Only since the 1920s has the original movement diverged into conservative Evangelicals, who have discovered and generally maintained this unity in a series of interdenominational organizations, and liberal Evangelicals, who have devoted themselves to denominational mergers, ecumenical discussions and even inter-faith dialogue.

Splits over Scripture

Mention of liberals and conservatives within the Protestant camp brings us to the last, and for many the most painful of all the splits which have occurred within the Church. This is the split over the inspiration and authority of Holy Scripture. Just as the Protestant-Catholic divide makes little sense to Orthodox Christians, who view the issues in quite a different perspective, the liberal-conservative divide within Protestantism is also often misunderstood by outsiders. Other Christians treat the authority of Scripture very differently, and though they accept

its divine inspiration are seldom bothered by the details. Only in the context of a theological tradition whose authority is the voice of the Holy Spirit can the question of where that voice is to be heard assume crucial practical importance. Because traditional Protestantism asserted that it could be heard only in Scripture, which thus became the final authority for the Church, the question of the text's inspiration and status cannot be avoided in Protestant theology.

At first sight, it must be said that the liberal position looks more plausible, because it appears to continue the development of Protestantism in a more radical way, shedding some of conservative Evangelicalism's catholic hangovers – the credal framework of doctrine, the inspiration of Scripture and so on. In particular, its strongest claim is that God speaks to and through people, not things – and the Bible is a thing! It is often supposed, moreover, that liberalism can only be a thinly-veiled rationalism with little or no connection with the main body of the church at the level of worshipping congregations. But, in reality, this is far from being the case. Liberalism is rampant in the churches, and very enthusiastic indeed. Intellectually, it appears as Barthian neo-orthodoxy; devotionally, it is most evident in the charismatic movement. Put the two together, as is happening more and more today, and you have a powerful, seemingly orthodox theology based ultimately on subjective experience, not on objective inspiration.

It may seem very odd to say that charismatics are liberals, when so many seem to be ultra-conservative in doctrinal matters, but this conservatism is really an illusion. In practice, charismatics show a theological indifference which makes the World Council of Churches look almost sectarian. If you speak in tongues you are 'in', regardless of what you might believe in other areas. The movement is characterized by a divorce between spirit and reason which is the very essence of romantic liberalism and takes us right back to the eighteenth century. It puts an emphasis on personal experience which is so central that academic study appears to be not only unnecessary, but even

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diabolical by comparison. Like more traditional Evangelicals, charismatics revolt against the rationalistic theology of our universities, but whereas the former strive to provide something better, the latter ignore it altogether, preferring to derive their own blessed thoughts from the Bible. If this Bible reading ever becomes serious Bible study, the charismatic reader is left exposed to the most radical forms of liberal thought which he may piece together in a quite disorganized way. Let a doubter read one of James Dunn's more recent books, if he needs to be convinced of this.

The debate about Scripture is by no means over in Protestant circles, and although some groups and organizations belong clearly on one side of the fence or another, most are still trying to sit on it – including the major denominations. Broadly speaking, the situation is that paper confessions and the like favour the conservatives, whilst actual interpretations are so broad that they favour the liberals. This has been true in the main denominations for about a century now, and it is beginning to creep into organizations originally set up by conservatives to combat this earlier trend. On the other hand, modern conservatives have organized their theological resources to fight back – most notably in the Chicago Declaration of Inerrancy, published in 1978. This document, whose ultimate historical importance is still unknown, is the most important statement to date of a reasoned conservative position. If it is weak in some places, it is probably because little attempt has been made to set it in the context of the wider theological issues which have been raised in this paper. If we believe, as we presumably do, that God speaks to people, how are we going to relate what the Bible says to what God is saying to us? Does he just explain what the words mean, as a kind of heavenly encyclopaedia of information, or does he interpret these for us in our situation today? Most Evangelicals will opt for the latter, but in that case, how do we avoid the crypto-liberalism of the New Hermeneutic? It is not much good having an inspired text if nobody can understand it, or if the understanding is subject to changing scholarly opinion and/or spiritual fashions.

The answer to this problem, I think, needs to be found in a new understanding of tradition as person-to-person contact through the ages – the communion of saints who since apostolic times have lived, preached and handed on the gospel. Even more, we need to insist that in the Bible we have the *living voice* of the Spirit and not merely the historical record of what he once said. The interpretation of this living voice must once again be seen to belong to the preacher, whose gift it properly is, and not to the scholar, whose disciplines are secondary and auxiliary to the main task. Whether the Evangelical world, which is as dominated by scholars as is any other part of the church, is really up to the task remains to be seen. It may well be that there will be further and greater divisions before this common understanding can be reached.

We have come then, by a somewhat lengthy route, to the burning issues of the present day. As in the past, the pain of separation is not caused by the things which divide us – on these we have perhaps never been in contact – but on the things which continue to unite us, but which are powerless to prevent further division. Liberal and conservative Protestants share many things in common. Moreover, until the final separation takes place – and that, as we have seen, will happen only after centuries of debate during which a precise theological platform, excluding the alternatives, will have been worked out – there will be a grey area of people who will float from one side to the other, and both groups will continue to work together at many different levels. These things have to be expected – it was the same at the time of the Reformation, the same in the Middle Ages, the same in the early church – but the general sense of movement should also be expected, and understood!

Conclusion

In conclusion therefore, I want to say that Christian theology has a fundamental unity which its many traditions share in differing degrees. The diversity which has manifested itself

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over the centuries has proceeded logically from one theological point to the next. However strong political or cultural factors may have been in promoting the various divisions, the fundamental motive has always been a theological one. Only that can adequately explain the enduring character of the divisions and the resistance which they have shown to subsequent attempts at reunion.

The church today is perhaps best compared to a tree, its various branches mingling with each other in different ways and touching each other at different points, so that seen from certain angles they might even appear to be one. But in reality the branches cannot be cut down without destroying the tree, nor can the trunk do any more than continue to feed their growth, in the process growing slowly itself. As is the way with such things, the tree's beauty can only be perceived at a distance. The view from any one of the branches is complicated and may even be off-putting. Yet I believe that God, in his good time, will take us up from those branches and give us, not the tree of theology, but the tree of life whose leaves are for the healing of the nations – the presence and power of Jesus Christ himself, enthroned in his glory in heaven.