CHRISTIAN UNITY

THE THREE MOST significant contemporary developments in our Christian thought and practice are the revival of a Biblical and Christological theology, the re-emphasis on evangelism and the out-going mission of the Church, and the Ecumenical Movement, with its achievements and aspirations in the cause of Christian unity. This latter enterprise, the great new fact of our time, is what we are to consider briefly. It should be noted that this is no official voice — although many others obviously share my views — but the personal understandings of an ordinary parish minister in the Church of Scotland, committed by the constitution of that church, the Declaratory Articles.

VI. to recognize ‘the obligation to seek and promote union with other Churches in which it finds the word to be purely preached, the sacraments administered according to Christ’s ordinance, and discipline rightly exercised; and it has the right to unite with any such Church without loss of its identity’ (italics mine). These aims are made explicit at ordination by question 5, ‘Do you promise to seek the unity and peace of this Church . . . and to cherish a spirit of brotherhood towards all the followers of the Lord?’

The General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in May 1953 appointed representative churchmen and scholars to engage in united study with representatives of the Church of England, the Episcopal Church in Scotland, and the Presbyterian Church of England concerning ‘the fundamental theological problems of the nature of the Church of Christ’. Their report on ‘Relations between Anglican and Presbyterian Churches’ was presented to the General Assembly in May 1957 when it was received, recognized as ‘no more than an exploratory survey’ which ‘in no way commits the Church of Scotland to accepting its arguments or conclusions’, and commended ‘to the careful study of members of the Church at every level’.

The report came as a bombshell to Scotland, and for the past ten months has been the subject of constant discussion. The editorial columns of the newspapers have rarely known so continuous a theme; there has been a spate of pamphlets and pronouncements, meetings have been held throughout the land both in public and in private. At least 70,000 copies of the Report have been sold in Scotland as against 7,000 in England. Erudition has jostled with uninformed prejudice, and new organizations have been set up to oppose the main suggestions embodied in the Report.

The signatories and apologists for the Report have pleaded for patience and delay in reaching decision; it has been argued that these are only suggestions and not a ‘blueprint’, and therefore not definitive; it has been urged that to disown the Report would be to do serious harm to the cause of church unity. Even the plea, ‘Trust the experts’, who are mainly professors in our theological colleges, has been raised, as if learning and integrity were inevitably guarantees of wise judgment. None the less, it is abundantly clear that there is a preponderating majority within the Scottish churches which is irrevocably opposed to the suggestions embodied in the Report. If it were possible, by some unimaginable accident, for these proposals to be implemented, the greatest disruption ever known in Scotland would certainly take place.

The objections are focused on the suggestion that an innovation be made of a ‘Bishop in Presbytery’ into the government of the Church of Scotland; these officials are to be consecrated ‘at the hands of Bishops as well as with the authority of the collective Presbytery’, and this would ensure that the
new diocesan would be within the Apostolic Succession, part of the historic episcopate. Because of this, the document is now generally dubbed by friend and foe alike as the 'Bishops' Report'.

The signatories of the report renounced any reference to the faults and errors of past history, but it is quite impossible to receive their findings in vacuo as we are all involved in the historic process, and since God is the theme of all aspects of history, there should be some indication, at least, as to the manner in which the march of past events. It is neither possible nor wise to seek any solution of this nature de novo. It was also declared that controversy and discussion about the meaning of Church Order should be eschewed, but it is just at this place of conflicting interpretations that the issue rests.

To quote the Report: 'The governing principles of the Conferences have therefore been to seek throughout the necessary of unity if the Lord's will for His Church is to be done, and free quotation has been made of our Lord's prayer in John xvi. 21: 'That they all may be one, as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may know that thou hast sent me.' From this is educate that there must be one Catholic Holy Church, a visible organizational unity so that those outside the Church might believe in Christ. The phrase 'our sinful divisions' is often quoted.

Against this has it been pointed out that the unity spoken of by our Lord in his great High Priestly prayer is a spiritual thing. Although it is specifically denied in the Report that the unity sought after is uniformity, one of the Scottish signatories, Professor Manson, states that spiritual unity is not in itself sufficient obedience to the divine command and yet, without this is the any room for differing forms of worship and government?

There are too often much enthusiastic talk about what is called 'the essential unity' of our various churches, wishful thinking indeed, but to talk of spiritual oneness when one church categorically refuses to admit members of other churches to its communion and most significant act of worship is to renounce the salvation of the world, is not to be understood in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is to make nonsense of language. In October 1956, the Rev. Professor James Baxter, Dean of the Faculty of Divinity at the University of St. Andrews, delivered a lecture on some of the problems of church union. The Rev. Eric Graham, Bishop of Brechin and son of a former Scottish Presbyterian minister. In his course of he has pointed it out that seems to me to think one must in any manner approach the unity of other churches, and yet, without this is the any room for any arrangement that cannot be done to bring the Church of England has insisted upon and tried regularly to achieve since the sixteenth century with other churches, but always on their conditions — is that Christian? That is authoritarian. Turning to the bishop sitting at his side the professor asked quietly: 'I wonder if my Lord Bishop would give me Communion?'

The Report, although within the Report that unity of church government and practice is God's will for His Church, there are many who would hold that this striving for a monolithic organization, this allegiog in the unexample of the pre-Reformation Christendom, is just another phase of the cult of 'bigness of mergers'. I know that is perfectly enough in every department of our political, social and economic, and any arrangement which results in quantitative increase is sure to be haled as progress.

Inevitably, there is no evidence of one unified government in the early Christian Church, and Canon Streeter, with others, has pointed out the divergences which have existed from the very first. Neither episcopacy nor presbyterianism can claim any jus divinum for each, and both find their place within the New Testament. The rise of church government in the early Christian Church and by this same token, even all systems can be judged. We tend to fall too easily into the habit of supposing that because something is hallowed by tradition and custom it is, therefore, the best thing in our own circumstances. The bishops are called to go back to the Apostolic Church, that as the source of authority, we are entitled to claim the right to go back even further, to the New Testament itself in which the priesthood of all believers is affirmed, where each member of the Body of Christ is one of 'an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ' (1 Pet. ii. 5).

No later development in the process of adaptation, experiment and change should be allowed to obscure this spiritual liberty, this privilege and responsibility of the individual Christian.

Is it not possible to establish a modus vivendi in which disputing is displaced by an enriching diversity? The Holy Spirit with all the variety of his gifts and in this whole chapter of 1 Corinthians xii it is made evident that 'there are diversities, but the same spirit. And there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord.'

Since the one Spirit we are all baptized into the Body, even Christ: 'whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free, whether we be Episcopalian or Presbyterian, Congregationalist or Christian Brethren. What is the Method of our Salvation Army? Surely the all-important dictum is to keep always in mind that there is a better way', the way of love, and to obey the injunction 'follow after love'.

In his great book Vision and Authority John Oman writes, 'It may even be that God's wise and gentle organization, greater division is in store for us until, through the sheer impossibility of believing in the one outward, visible Church founded on compromise and regulation, men may be driven to look for the inward, invisible Church, and be taught they only seek as they walk in love. Then may we be able to achieve outward union, not as a substitute for the inward union, but as its vehicle and its expression — or it may be, we shall not need it.'

The God of Nature is the God of grace, and in a world of such infinite variety and yet, without this is the any room for differing forms of worship and government? No-one denies the beauty of the Anglican liturgy, the aesthetic appeals of colour and form, and the reverential spirit of so many of its worshipping members, but there are some robust souls who are almost oblivious to these things. The God of Nature is the God of liberty, and can we say that to this appeal. They will not answer. They will not have it.

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was made to John Wesley and his brother Charles, and, in accepting, the former wrote, "Might it not be practicable to have the concurrence of Mr. Edwards in New England . . . ? Why should we not all praise God with one heart?" And so an English Episcopalian recommended to Scottish Presbyterians the inclusion of an American Independent within the comprehension of united intercession! If we were to pray more, we should see more clearly, and much that seems important would shrink into its true insignificance.

Thirdly, we can work together in our united evangelism. One worth-while feature of the All-Scotland Crusade conducted by Billy Graham almost three years ago was that Christians of various denominations learned to understand, respect, and love each other. Working together makes us all kin.

George Whitefield made fourteen visits to Scotland, and one of our historians writes: "Their predominant influence was breaking down party zeal and sectarian bigotry . . . he was one who rose above all party shibboleths and who would preach anywhere if he only felt a new opportunity of doing good. It is pleasant, too, to recall that pulpit in the Church of Scotland were open to him, when those in England were closed against him." Mrs. Whitefield wrote to John Cennick on 16th June 1752: "My husband publicly declared here, that he was a member of the Church of England and a curate thereof; and yet he was permitted to receive and assist at the Lord's Supper in the churches at Edinburgh." It was one of these Scottish ministers, John Willison, who said, 'Commend me to a pious Christ-exalting and Soul winning Minister, whatever be his Denomination; such are Ministers of Christ's sending.' And in similar fashion, Howell Harris of Wales, John Wesley and other great evangelists revealed their amazing catholicity of spirit and readiness to unite. Love banishes all bigotry; faction, party and prejudice are burned up as dross in revival fires. To live with Christ, in Christ, for Christ, to labour to win for the Lamb slain the reward of His sufferings is to find oneself in true Christian unity with all others who seek and serve the same glorious end.

Johnstone.

Arthur Fawcett, M.A., B.D., Ph.D.