

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 *Theological Students Fellowship* (TSF) *Bulletin* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_tsfbulletin_01.php

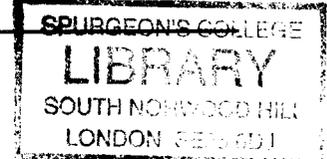
THE THEOLOGICAL STUDENTS' FELLOWSHIP

TERMINAL LETTER FOR STUDENTS AND MINISTERS

SUMMER 1958

39 BEDFORD SQUARE, LONDON, W.C.1

No 21



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 Oecumenical 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 diocesans 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 Lord of history, there should be some indication of His purposes within 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 nature 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 Conversations have therefore throughout been the necessity of unity if the Lord's will for His Church is to be done', and frequent quotation has been made of our Lord's prayer in John xvii. 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 believe that thou hast sent me.' From this it is deduced that there must be 'One, Holy, Catholic 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 it has been pointed out that the unity spoken of by our Lord in His great High Priestly prayer is a spiritual and not a physical 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, any visible unity is but a travesty.

There is 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 the central and most significant act of worship by believing men 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 in the University of St. Andrews, debated the Report with the Right Rev. Eric Graham, Bishop of Brechin and son of a former Scottish Presbyterian minister. In the course of his speech he said, 'It seems to me that to demand from us an acceptance of their position is to demand not union but absorption, not consideration but contempt, not Christian brotherhood but — forgive me for saying it — arrogant worldliness. This demand for unity which 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 totalitarian. 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?' There was no reply.

It is almost axiomatic within the Report that uniformity of church government and practice is God's will for His Church, but there are many who would hold that this striving for a monolithic organization, this nostalgia for the unrent robe of pre-Reformation Christendom, is just another phase of the contemporary cult of 'bigness'. Amalgamations and mergers are common enough in every department of our political, social and economic life, and any arrangement which results in quantitative increase is sure to be hailed as progress.

Historically, 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 *ius divinum* for each, and both find their place within the record of the New Testament. The rise of episcopacy with its threefold orders of bishop, priest and deacon is easily understood in the light of political, social and sentimental circumstances, but at the very most it should be appreciated as functional, as being of the *bene esse* rather than the *esse* of the Church. And by this same token, all other 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. When we are called to go back to the Fathers, apostolic and post-apostolic, 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 disunity is displaced by an enriching diversity? The Holy Spirit with all the variety of unity giveth 'severally as he will', and in this whole chapter of 1 Corinthians xii it is made evident that 'there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord.'

Since by the one Spirit we are all baptized into the one Body, even Christ, 'whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free', why not 'whether we be Episcopalian or Presbyterian, Congregationalist or Christian Brethren, Methodist or Salvation Army'? Surely the all-important dictum is to keep always in mind that there is 'a more excellent 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 in God's wise government, still 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 unity as they walk in love. Then may we be able to achieve outward union, not as a substitute for the inward unity, 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, may it not be that there is 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 this appeal. They need the vociferousness of tambourine and drum, and the ejaculated 'Hallelujah' — and why should they not have it? There are many ecological reasons for religious community, and I have had no hesitation in recommending some whom it has been my privilege to lead to Christ to associate themselves with the local Baptist Church. Its informality and sense of intimacy, due in some measure to the limited size of the congregation, was an ideal home for them.

Corporate unity must come as a consequence, rather than be a cause. The many members of the Body of Christ could cooperate, consult, and work together, exercising their particular functions and gifts side by side. If they were to do this in the spirit of Christ, 'in honour preferring one another', the purpose of the gospel would be fulfilled. We must grow into unity; it cannot be coerced or arranged.

It seems evident here in Scotland that this attempt to organize union from above must fail. It asks too much to achieve so little, and would mean the unilateral abandonment of what we understand by reformed church government by presbytery. Is there then nothing that can be done to bring us nearer together, and to promote true brotherhood, a truly catholic spirit?

Three possibilities at least are open to those of us who seek to be Evangelicals in our Christian understanding and dedication.

First, we must turn our faces resolutely against a party spirit; there is such a thing as pride of race, place, face, and, alas, of grace too. Our Lord taught His disciples what should have been a salutary lesson. John, very self-satisfied, reported that he had silenced one who was 'casting out devils in thy name . . . because he followeth not with us' (Lk. ix. 49) and the ever-magnanimous Jesus rebuked this attitude: 'for he that is not against us is for us.' John Wesley once said, 'If thy heart be as my heart, give me thy hand.' Can we say as much as that?

Secondly, we can pray together. There are credal statements such as the Apostles' Creed that we can all accept; there are prayers such as the Lord's Prayer in which all who love the Lord Jesus can unite. As we come in penitence, worship and need before God we know our essential unity. It is difficult to be angry with a man on any count when we are on our knees together.

In 1744, soon after the Cambuslang revival, a group of Scottish ministers and laymen entered into an agreement to meet for prayer regularly each month to pray for the success of the gospel throughout the world. Thus was born the Concert for Prayer. An invitation to accede to this arrangement

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 at 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 pulpits 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.