

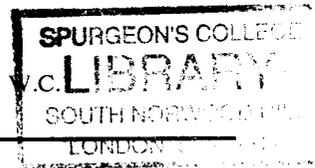
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LAMBETH AND CHURCH UNITY

(Extracts from a sermon by the Rev. J. R. W. STOTT on the second section of the Lambeth Report, 1958.)

THE 1958 LAMBETH REPORT begins with a brief introduction expressing the urgent need for Christian unity in the grave state of the world today. Its words of introduction are these: "Physician, heal thyself." — Such is the challenge which comes with ever increasing urgency to the Church today, as the Church seeks, in obedience to Christ, to proclaim the word of reconciliation in the midst of a world torn by divisions and conflicts. To proclaim effectively the Gospel of God's reconciling love to the world, the Church must manifest in its own life the healing and reconciling power of the word it proclaims' (2.20).

There then follows a very forthright 'Statement on Christian Unity', which was welcomed and endorsed by the Conference in its 13th resolution. Next comes a clarification of the terms 'full communion' and 'intercommunion', and a suggestion called 'wider episcopal fellowship', that bishops other than those of the Anglican Communion should be drawn into consultation and even invited to the next Lambeth Conference.

The Report's remaining thirty-five pages are devoted to a careful consideration of various schemes of reunion, and of the Church of England's relations to particular Churches. First, the present relation of the Anglican Communion to the Church of South India is described. Next, the Scheme of Church Union in Ceylon, and the Plan of Church Union in North India and Pakistan, both of which involve Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Anglicans, and some others, are discussed in detail. Then, coming nearer home, the Report turns at some length to relations between the Anglican and Presbyterian Churches, and the conversations between the Church of England and the Methodist Church.

Now I mention all that to show you that there is a wealth of material for study in this Report, which ends with three pages about the Ecumenical Movement in general, and the World Council of Churches in particular, which came into being in 1948 just after the last Lambeth Conference.

Now it is a bit bewildering to know just what aspects of this Report we should select for comment. But because every sermon that is preached in the context of divine worship should be an exposition of the Word of God and not an exposition of a document of men, I propose now to turn you to a passage of Holy Scripture, to Ephesians iv. 1-6. I want to bring you from that passage, illustrated from the Lambeth Report, three simple truths.

The first concerns *the spiritual unity which already exists* among Christians, Yes, even among Christians of different confessions, and different Churches, and different traditions, and different denominations. You will observe that the Apostle's exhortation in verse 3 is that we should be eager to keep the unity of the Spirit. That is to say, the unity of which he writes is a state to be maintained and not a goal to be achieved. The Apostle proceeds to teach the basis of this spiritual and invisible unity that already exists. The basis of it is the unity of the Godhead.

Verse 6: There is one God and Father of us all. How then can there be many Christian families if there is only one Father?

Verses 4, 5: You were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism. How then can there be many Christian

faiths if there is only one Lord in whom all Christians believe, into whom all Christians have been baptised, and for whose return in glory all Christians are waiting in hope?

Verse 4: There is one body and one Spirit. How then can there be many Christian bodies when there is only one Holy Spirit who indwells the one body which He has created?

Now this is tremendously important: the one Father creates the one family; the one Lord Jesus creates the one faith, hope, and baptism; and the one Holy Spirit creates the one Christian body. Here is a Trinitarian guarantee of the spiritual unity of the Christian Church; the unity of the Church is as inviolable as the unity of the Godhead. You could as soon break the one as the other. We may be divided — we are, alas, divided on the human visible level by denominational barriers which we deplore — but our underlying divine spiritual unity still remains. The same Father is over us all, the same Lord is the object of our faith, the same Holy Spirit indwells us.

Now, the Lambeth Report on Church Unity and the Church Universal recognizes this fact. Let me quote: one of 'the assumptions underlying the World Council of Churches' is that 'the member Churches of the World Council believe on the basis of the New Testament that the Church of Christ is one' (2.59). It is one even when it is divided. Again, the 'Statement on Christian Unity' in this Report (welcomed and endorsed by the Conference at large) includes this statement: 'We believe in One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church, which takes its origin not in the will of man but in the will of our Lord Jesus Christ. All those who believe in our Lord Jesus Christ and have been baptised in the name of the Holy Trinity are incorporated into the Body of Christ and are members of the Church. Here is a unity already given' (2.21). There is a sense, then, in which Christian unity is said in the Lambeth Report to need to be 'demonstrated' rather than just 'recovered and manifested'.

A spiritual unity already exists. So it is that the bishops in the Encyclical Letter 'rejoice in the many signs of closer Christian fellowship' (1.23) which may be seen in the world today.

Yet I hope that I carry you with me in saying that no Christian is content with a Christian fellowship that cannot express itself in full communion the one with the other. An intolerable situation exists in Christendom today, in which Christians who are resident in the same district, or the same village or the same street, separate from one another for worship on the Lord's Day, and in which Churches do not recognize each other's ministries, and in some cases forbid their members to attend each other's Communions. And so the Lambeth Report is quite clear that something more is needed than merely spiritual fellowship.

What is needed, to quote from the Report again, is 'the recovery of the visible unity of the Church Universal according to the will of Christ' (2.31). Again, 'the unity between Christian Churches ought to be a living unity in the love of Christ, which is shown in full Christian fellowship and in mutual service, while also, subject to sufficient agreement in faith and order, expressing itself in free interchange of ministries and fulness of sacramental communion' (2.22). Several times the Report repeats 'that organic unity must at all times and in all cases be the ultimate goal' (2.45), while resolution 30 'encourages continuance of the Conversations with a view to the making of concrete proposals . . . but on the understanding that organic union is definitely accepted as the final goal'.

I want to come on, secondly, to talk about *the organic unity which is to be sought*.

This Lambeth Report envisages the creation of united national Churches, somewhat on the pattern of the Church of South India, which came into existence in 1947, a year before the last Lambeth Conference. The Report gives much space both to the Scheme of Church Union in Ceylon and the Plan of Church Union in North India and Pakistan. Now in such united Churches there is or will be full integration of the uniting bodies in one Church. The uniting bodies retain fellowship and communion with the home Churches of which they were formerly branches, but they lose their separate identity. Now of course this is tremendous; this is something new in the last decade of the Church's history.

To give an example — there are no Anglicans in the Church of South

India today. Those people who were Anglicans eleven years ago are no longer members of the Church of England; they are members of the Church of South India. Nevertheless they are still in communion with the Church of England at home.

Now such an integration of Churches into one national Church is exposed to the obvious danger of regimentation and colourless uniformity. But the Lambeth Report is fully alive to this danger.

Let me quote again from it. The Report quotes Resolution 56 of the 1948 Lambeth Report which envisages 'a Church genuinely Catholic, loyal to all truth, gathering into its fellowship "all who profess and call themselves Christians"', within whose visible unity all the treasures of faith and order bequeathed as a heritage by the past to the present, shall be possessed in common and made serviceable to the whole Body of Christ' (2.29). Similarly, in the Statement on Christian unity, 'It is our longing that all the spiritual gifts and insights by which the particular Churches live to His glory may find their full scope and enrichment in a united Church' (2.22).

Further, I find in this second Report of the Lambeth Conference a most welcome and wholesome note of genuine Anglican humility, namely that in such united Churches Anglicans will have much to learn and much to gain from the other uniting bodies. Thus, the Presbyterian office of lay eldership will be a great gain in a united Church. Again, the Methodist doctrines of Scriptural holiness and of assurance, and the emphasis of both these Churches on the participation of the laity in the evangelistic work and government of the Church, will be a great gain. And this Lambeth Report of the Anglican Communion humbly admits it, thank God.

Now we come to the question: on what basis is such an organic unity to be achieved? It is not to be achieved lightly or thoughtlessly. To quote again from the Report, 'The theological issues, especially those concerning the Church and the ministry, should be faced at the outset' (2.29). With regard to the proposed united Churches both in Ceylon and in North India and Pakistan the Report states that 'care has been taken on theological issues; and the doctrinal statements of both the Scheme and the Plan are unexceptionable. No Anglican need entertain any doubt concerning the orthodoxy of the Faith of the resulting Churches' (2.31). Well then, what is the doctrinal basis of such organic unity? The answer given by the Lambeth Conference in both 1920 and 1958 is as follows:

'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' (2.22).

This is what is known as the 'Lambeth Quadrilateral': the Holy Scriptures; the two Creeds; the two sacraments; and a ministry acknowledged by every part of the Church. It is the last of these four which is the most noteworthy, because the Lambeth Quadrilateral of 1888 (slightly revised from the 1886 statement of the General Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church at Chicago) specifically stated that this acknowledged ministry must be 'the Historic Episcopate'. But that phrase is absent in this Report. The 1958 Report certainly adds that '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'. But it adds both that this need be 'not necessarily in the precise form prevailing in any part of the Anglican Communion', and this very important statement: 'We fully recognise that there are other forms of ministry than episcopacy in which have been revealed the gracious activity of God in the life of the Universal Church' (2.22). Now this is most welcome. There is no hint in the Report of a rigid view of so-called 'Apostolic Succession'. Indeed, the phrase itself is absent from the Report. And it is emphatically stated in the Third Revised Plan for Church Union in North India and

Pakistan that the Church is not committed to 'any one particular theological interpretation of episcopacy' (2.35).

The uniting Churches will all be episcopal, but episcopacy is recommended to the uniting Churches not because doubt is cast on the validity of other systems or alternative ministries, but because 'there has been a growing appreciation of the bishop in the Church of God as a bond of continuity and unity' (2.27),* and because of the great pastoral value of his office. In a word, the Report seems to recognize what evangelical Christians have always believed and declared, that bishops do not belong to the *esse*, but to the *bene esse*, of the Church. That is, they do not belong to the being of the Church — you can have a true Church without bishops — but they belong to the well-being of the Church.

We have spoken of the spiritual unity which already exists between Christians; and of the organic unity which we desire shall exist one day in national united Churches. Now thirdly, we must consider *practical measures to be adopted for the attainment of organic unity*. The Report suggests five ways by which this unity can be achieved.

First, Christians are urged *to pray*. Priority is given in this Report to prayer. In Resolution 57 it is written: 'The Conference wishes to emphasize the importance of widespread prayer for the unity of all Christian people' (1.43). It calls upon 'Church members, under the leadership of the bishop and clergy of the diocese . . . to join with their fellow Christians in united prayer' (1.23).

Secondly, Christians are urged 'to do their utmost through national and local Councils of Churches for *common Christian witness and common service* to their fellows' (2.23).

Thirdly, Christians are '*to show a spirit of charity* in their dealings with other Christians . . . , to respect other Christian Churches, to refrain from harsh or unkind words about them . . . ' (2.23). 'Intercommunion and even union will bear little fruit without the love that bears one another's burdens and seeks deep mutual understanding' (2.58).

Fourthly, Christians are '*to seek to understand* both their life and their doctrine by common study and by personal contacts' (2.23).

Fifthly, Christians are 'to remember always that the nearer we draw to Christ, the nearer we draw to one another' (2.23).

* This quotation in the Report is taken from the United Report (on the Church of South India) of the two Joint Committees of the Convocations of Canterbury and York, accepted by these Convocations in 1955.