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What is the Church?



By a Member of a Reunion Conference.

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WHAT IS THE CHURCH?

BY A MEMBER OF A REUNION CONFERENCE.

For many years now there have been Conferences held by members of different Christian denominations with a view to discovering how the damage done to the cause of Christ due to the divisions of Christendom may be repaired.

It is all but universally recognised that the existing divisions of Christian people into denominations, which not only are out of organic relationship with each other, but are in serious doctrinal conflict, is opposed to the will of Him who prayed "That they all might be one, that the world might believe." Further, it is recognised by those who have given any close study to the facts, that, as regards the greater denominations, the guilt of schism does not lie on one side only of the lines of division; while it cannot be denied that in these Christian groups, commonly called Churches, many lives of beauty and personal holiness have been, and are being, lived; and the Fruits of the Spirit are plain for all to see. It does not follow that, since this is so, all are equally right or equally wrong; but it does mean that we can approach one another as brethren in Christ to see how the consequences of the mistakes of the past can be overcome; and what steps we can take to heal the wounds of the Mystical Body.

All persons interested in the question of reunion know of the great Conferences held in Lausanne in 1927 and in Edinburgh in 1937; but it may not be so generally known that these have been followed up by innumerable smaller conferences in many parts of the world. It is hoped by these to prepare the way for a reunion which, based upon thorough understanding and sound principles, may be expected to have in it the qualities both of permanence and spiritual fruitfulness.

These Conferences have often commenced by accentuating the differences between the denominations, and this is no doubt to the good, because no useful advance can be made in a fog. The first thing to know is the truth about the existing situation. It has become very clear that one of the most intractable difficulties concerns the nature and authority of the Christian Ministry. After a great deal of discussion about this, another fact has emerged, namely, that this difficulty is in reality part of a greater one, and that no sound advance can be expected until Christian people in various denominations are clear in their minds as to what they mean when they all agree to

affirm: "I believe in the One, Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church." The consequence is that in all parts of the Christian world the attention is being focussed upon the Church,—“that wonderful and sacred mystery” through which Christ continues His work of redemption in the world.

In Melbourne there has been meeting, under the chairmanship of the Archbishop, a Conference of Anglicans and Methodists for several years past, and it is hoped that a Report may shortly be issued. Many have been wondering what the aim of these Conferences has been, and what is to be expected of them. There have been, in some quarters, exaggerated hopes and fears. It may perhaps be of interest if an Anglican member expresses what he understands to be the immediate aim of the Conferences.

The Aim of the Conferences.

It was agreed early to set down clearly in a Document the points of agreement and the points of disagreement in parallel columns, without attempting to minimise differences.

It was known that very much was held in common. It was hoped that some differences might be resolved by mutual explanation. It was believed that some—which did not concern principles of truth but methods of operation—might be overcome by compromise and adjustment. It was desired to know what, if any, were the intractable, and, as yet, insoluble, difficulties in the way of reunion.

The Conference recognised that, whilst those on either side may hold beliefs with sincere and deep conviction which they must necessarily desire to share with all other Christian people, the aim of the Conferences was not to convert, but to understand and expound our beliefs; for alteration of views within the Conference would not affect the general situation appreciably. On the other hand, it was hoped that sympathetic and respectful attention given to the clear exposition of unfamiliar views, held by large bodies of earnest Christian people within the Church of God, might lead, in time, to the better understanding of the Truth as it is in Christ Jesus, and to the removal of misunderstandings and prejudices on either side, and so hasten the day of union.

The Conference did not desire that one side or the other should be led by word or act to commit itself to a position which would not be endorsed by the Communion which in some sense were represented.

The aim, then, may be said to be mainly educative, first as regards members of the Conference, and secondly as regards Ministers and Laity generally of the Methodist and Anglican Communion, and possibly others beyond. We believed that no re-union could be satisfactory or permanent without the general understanding and goodwill of the Churches in question.

An Anglican Commentary.

A. It would seem clear that if reunion is to be brought about within measurable time the reunited Church must find room for

diversities of belief on important theological points, for diversities of ecclesiastical organisation within the Church, and divergences of devotional practice.

Theoretically there is no reason why this should not be within large limits. There were such in the Apostolic Church, evidently; there are such in the Anglican Communion to-day, at least as regards the first and third points.

There is no reason why the Circuit system should not co-exist with the Parochial system, for instance. Further, there is no reason why the governmental systems known broadly as monarchy, oligarchy and democracy should not each find a place in the Church. It appears that they did in New Testament times.

It may be that the very condition of reunion, and the very task of our times, is to find how that which is of value in the Papal system, the Episcopal system and the Congregational system can be preserved to the Church of the future.

In the world these systems of government are found at different times and places. Each has recognised advantages, and dangers. One form of government gives place to another often by revolution. It may be that the Church should be so ordered that the Holy Spirit can use a Pope, a Council of Bishops, or the General Consciousness of the Church, as occasion may require, to express His Mind. He used St. Peter to admit the first Gentile to the Christian Church. He used a Council at Jerusalem to sweep away Judaism; in which Council the mind of the Spirit-bearing Body became clear so that the Apostles and Brethren could say: "It seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us. . . ."

It is just in this liberty of the Holy Ghost that the Church differs from the world. What is impossible with men is possible with God, because it is not man who governs, but the Holy Spirit who operates freely in and through men using in the Church whatever form of government He may please, in so far as the form has not been destroyed by man's sin.

B. There have always been differences of belief amongst Christians. This arises partly through man's sin and blindness; and partly because the unfolding of the Christian truth is gradual. "The Lord has yet more light and truth to break forth from His Word." Christians must therefore expect to be out of step to some extent in the understanding of the Gospel and its implications.

Sometimes, however, divergences become so acute as to be unbearable in the same Fellowship. Historically such acute differences have been resolved by ecumenical Councils. There is no possibility of such Councils being held in the near future because of our divisions. The alternatives, therefore, which present themselves to those working for reunion are:—Either to come together agreeing to admit the irreducible divergences of belief and practice, arranging some practical accommodation for the same, in the hope that mutual contact and charity will, in God's good time, lead to the elimination of what is erroneous through the increased spiritual vigour of the reunited

Church. Alternatively, to remain apart until error persisted in works itself out in the denominations separately, or brings about the dissolution of the body that clings to it.

If we shrink from this latter alternative, and believe that God is calling us to union, then we must be prepared to include in our fellowship those beliefs and practices which are to be found within our respective Communion at present. This will call for much charity and forbearance. It might prove unworkable; and it might prove very beneficial to all. It could not but be a venture of faith, and hope, and charity.

C. One thing, however, would seem to be necessary as a pre-requisite of union, and that is to know the boundaries of the reunited Church. No body can function effectively unless it can be known to whom belong its rights, and privileges, and duties, and to whom these do not belong. This is certainly the case with the Church. "What have I to do to judge them that are without? Do not ye judge them that are within?" asks the Apostle (I Cor. v: 12). One of the functions of the Church is to discipline and train its members. It is the Household of Faith, the City of God; and, whatever its organisation, it is necessary to know who are to be treated as citizens and members.

It is for this reason that we cannot proceed far towards union without some agreed doctrine with regard to the nature of the Church. At the very least we must have some working agreement for practical purposes.

D. The Church is sacramental. Herein lies a source of strength and weakness. We should agree that all who seek admission to the Church by showing signs of repentance and by the acceptance of the Christian Faith as summed up in the Apostles' Creed should be granted admission by the Sacrament of Baptism, and treated as members of the Church unless formally excommunicated. There is no difficulty in the case of the baptised Christian who is living a converted life. The difficulty arises in regard to the unbaptised who seem to be "walking in the Spirit," for "As many as are led by the Spirit of God they are the sons of God" (Rom. viii: 14); and in the case of the baptised Christian who seems not to be in a state of grace.

If it be recognised that only those who are alive with the life of Christ, and all those who are alive with the life of Christ are truly members of the Body of Christ; then it must also be recognised that the outward and visible expression of that body in the institutional Church never exactly corresponds with the spiritual truth.

Two practical alternatives become then possible. The first is to be content for disciplinary and administrative purposes with the sacramental approximation. That is, to treat the Baptised who profess the Faith, and only these, as of the Body; and to leave those whom the form does not fit to God. Giving those who by conduct seem to be unchristian the benefit of the doubt, treating them as "within" unless formally excommunicated; and by refusing to allow apparently spiritual fruits—by themselves and apart from the

profession of the Church's Faith and admission by baptism—to qualify the individual for the rights and privileges of the Household of Faith.

It is in this case generally recognised that the visible Church is an approximation only to the spiritual reality in Christ; but it is a working approximation; and the Gospel Faith and Baptism is withheld from no one. "Repent and be baptised every one of you" is still the proclamation; and it is those who accept the invitation who are treated as "within" the Body.

The second alternative may be called a spiritual approximation. It arises from the evident fact that God gives grace to some to lead Christian lives who do not fulfil these conditions (notably some Quakers), and the evident fact that "within" there are unworthy members. This has tempted many to impose purely spiritual tests of membership. Sometimes it is Conversion which has been insisted on as the test; sometimes faithful living. But difficulties are only shifted, not escaped. Experience shows that conversion means many things, and there are various degrees of permanence of the converted life. Whilst if faithful living is to be the test, two difficulties occur. In the first place, someone must pass judgment as to this, which either involves some sort of spiritual inquisition, or else leaves membership entirely to the assertion of the individual. Secondly, it is common knowledge that many Christians lapse from grace and recover after longer or shorter intervals. The question arises, Do they then go in and out of the Church? If so, Who is to tell who is of the Church and who is not? If purely spiritual tests are attempted, the visible result is again no more than an approximation. And yet a further difficulty arises in the fact that such tests, if imposed, are liable to lead to hypocrisy, and pretence of spirituality which does not actually exist. The Denominations which have tried to purify the Church by limiting membership to the evidently spiritual persons have inevitably suffered much from "cant."

The basis of membership of the reunited Church needs to be examined carefully. There is, I think, no doubt as to the teaching and practice of the Anglican Communion in the matter. It recognises all the Baptised as of the Catholic Church and no others—while not feeling called upon to pronounce on their spiritual condition, which is known to God, and not revealed to man. It recognises that members may be unworthy, it warns against the great peril of unworthy Communion, and impenitent death; but does not make inquisition into any man's spiritual state before ministering to him the Church's privileges and means of grace. The responsibility of worthy reception is thrown on the individual. The priest may rebuke, reprove, exhort. In extreme cases the impenitent may be excommunicated by the Bishop; but, until that is done, the baptised person has access to the privileges of his status as a member of the Body, the Household, the City.

It would seem that the Methodist Church would require some further conditions for membership and its privileges; such as evidence

of conversion. This would seem to need explanation; and it may be asked whether one conversion does for the whole of life, or whether it needs to be repeated in case of lapses from grace, and who is to judge of such lapses? Does excommunication automatically occur with every lapse? Is restoration a private matter; or does it concern others?

E. The matter of Christian status is of importance in connection with the Sacrament of Holy Communion, as well as for other reasons.

The Church is not only "The Pillar and Ground of Truth"; it is clearly for the Church to say whether a person is ready for Baptism, Confirmation, or Communion, or Ordination, and so on.

Holy Communion is without doubt the highest privilege of the Christian. It is the partaking of the Blessed Body and Blood of the Lord. The Church in her exhortations warns against the great peril of the unworthy partaking of that Holy Mystery. The greatest penalty the Church can inflict on her members is the deprivation of Communion.

The Report of the "Edinburgh Conference" of 1937 contains these words: "The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, or Eucharist, is the Church's most sacred act of worship. Unity in sacramental worship requires essential unity in sacramental faith and practice." (p. 256, "Faith and Order," by Hodgson.)

It seems difficult to reconcile this statement, which seems to have been accepted by the whole Conference, with the paragraph in our Report beginning on line 17, page XI. m. "That we impose no restrictions on the catholicity of the Service of Communion, for we welcome, and invite, the whole world of Christian people to communicate with us in our Churches, and we are prepared to go to the communion of any Church which will receive us together with its own members in this means of grace."

Taken at its face value, this would seem to involve complete indifference in regard to heresy and schism, and a very slight significance attached to sacramental fellowship. There is need for explanation here. St. Paul orders excommunication for immorality, and St. John for heresy. Such corruptions as St. Paul anathematised (Gal. i:8) exist in the world. "The whole world of Christian People" mentioned above includes those who call themselves Theosophists, Mormons, Seventh-day Adventists, Christian Scientists, and hundreds of minor sects. The question is inescapable, whether or not the Church we have in mind has a duty of stewardship in regard to sacrament of Holy Communion, and a duty of witnessing to the importance of faithfulness to the Gospel, by requiring "unity in sacramental faith and practice" as a condition of receiving her highest treasure and privilege.

F. The question of "Open Communion" as against a certain exclusiveness is related to the question of Intercommunion.

In the denominations we represent views of the Eucharist are held varying probably from what is indistinguishable from Zwinglianism to what is religiously indistinguishable from the Roman

Catholic view. It is natural that, according to our estimate of its nature, purpose and significance, it will hold a different place in our thoughts, affections and devotional life.

I was astonished to read, some time ago, in the life of a Presbyterian missionary to Central Africa, that he gave Communion to the heathen before they were baptised, to those whom we should call catechumens. Even so I feel sure that he would not have given Communion to any heathen who desired it for whatever reason. The most "Open Communion" draws a line somewhere.

It may be a scandal to the world that those who love and desire to serve the same Lord cannot unite at His Holy Table; but it might be a far worse scandal if by admitting any one and every one in all stages of belief, misbelief and unbelief, we were to make that Holy Rite so common a thing that it ceased to have any significance of unity in it at all.

The Eucharist can only be a bond, a sign and seal of unity, in so far as it is exclusive of something. The important thing is that it should be inclusive and exclusive at the right point; and that drives us back to the question whether we are to be guided in administration of the Church's stewardship by what has been called a sacramental approximation or a spiritual approximation to the reality we desire to express by communion "in sacris."

In his opening address to the Edinburgh Conference the Archbishop of York used these words: "I speak as a member of one of those Churches which still maintain barriers against completeness of union at the Table of the Lord. I believe from my heart that we of that tradition are trustees for an element of truth concerning the nature of the Church which requires that exclusiveness as a consequence until this element of truth be incorporated, with others, into a fuller and worthier conception of the Church than any of us hold to-day."

The Archbishop makes clear, what is often not understood, that the Anglican inability to concede "Open Communion" is bound up with belief as to the nature of the Church. If he is pressed towards Intercommunion with those who are members of Churches with whom his Church is not in Communion, he feels himself pressed towards an insincerity. It could not mean to him what he feels it ought to mean; and the act would be misleading to his fellow communicants. He believes that, as an Anglican, he is "a trustee for an element of truth about the Church" which "requires that exclusiveness" in regard to Communion until that element is accepted; which, however, does not by any means mean until Anglicanism is accepted. It is a genuine Catholic doctrine of the Church that we need to be agreed upon if the Church is to re-discover her unity. And our exclusiveness is but a pointer to one element in that doctrine which must not be forgotten, namely, her trusteeship of the mysteries of God, her authority over her members, and her duty of discipline.

It may be worth recalling the following note from the Revised Draft Report of the Edinburgh Conference of 1937:—

"We feel moved to say in this connection that to press for intercommunion with those whose consciences forbid it, or to show impatience with those whose loyalties hold them back from that which many of us desire, is an offence against Christian charity and a disservice to the cause of Unity." (p. 366)

G. The question of the exercise of authority naturally raises the question of the ministry.

There is some agreement that we can afford to have differences of opinion as to the necessity for historical continuity of ministerial authority given through the episcopate, provided that action is of such a character that it does not offend faith.

The broad distinction of the priest and prophet is observable wherever there is true religion. The functions may, or may not, be united in a single individual. In the Church of the Old Covenant Ezekiel was an outstanding instance of one who was both prophet and priest. More often the functions were not so united. In the Church to-day—at least in those parts of it we are considering—the functions are generally united in the Christian minister, whatever he may be called.

On the priestly side the Minister represents and speaks for the Church. He is an organ of the Holy Body. His acts are of consequence because they are those of the Body, not just his own. He exercises a well-defined authority. He is commissioned to do certain things and not others. He knows the limits of his authority, for they are implicit in his commission. He is an officer in an army; an official in an organisation.

Now if the Church is to function satisfactorily, it is clear that its members must know who hold the authority to speak and act in the Church's name, and just what authority they possess. If there is to be order, discipline, loyalty and obedience within the Church, such as the Apostle Paul again and again demanded, the representative character of the ministry must be clear, and the delegated authority well established. The Church must somehow give its authority for certain administrative purposes to certain individuals. Historically this has been done through the episcopate. No bishop in the Apostolic line ever functioned without having committed to him authority so to function by the solemn rite of consecration, which he received at the hands of one to whom the duty of consecration had been previously committed. This is the practical significance of Apostolic succession, quite apart from the faith that through the solemn rite of consecration God is pleased to endow the recipient of authority with special grace to exercise it with power.

Difficulties concerning what is called the validity of ministrations are notoriously among the most formidable obstacles in the road to reunion. May it not be that these too will find their solution when we understand more clearly the nature of the Church and the representative character of the ministry?

H. To sum up these reflections, it would seem that the chief and urgent duty lying before all who desire unity in Christ to be

expressed in outward and visible fellowship and common loyalty is this: That we should set ourselves by prayer and earnest thought to understand better what is the mind of Christ with regard to His Church as regards its character, functions and organisation. The Church is an object of faith, not merely a fact in the world; and it is for faith to understand the mystery of the Body of Christ so far as is necessary for the healing of its wounds. This cannot be done by thinking alone, still less by arguing, but only by the spiritual perception that is born of humility and docility. We can in common pray for this, and be patient with one another, while we preserve a holy impatience to achieve the goal set before us.

It would seem, on the other hand, probable that to approach the old difficulties of the nature of the Priesthood and the Eucharist apart from the understanding of them as functions of the Church, may land us in a mere reiteration of the controversies of the 16th century. If we get into that whirlpool, may be we shall never get out.

I. It has been told of Edward Caird that as he lay dying he read St. Augustine's "Confessions," and remarked to a friend: "What ever philosophers may say about this man's answers, at any rate he knew how to ask the right questions."

That is probably the most important thing to do in connection with our problem. The right questions in connection with the reunion of the Churches would seem to be necessarily questions concerning the Church. And this is coming to be generally understood in all denominations which look towards reunion. This could be abundantly illustrated by numerous quotations from recent writers in the Roman, Orthodox, Anglican and Protestant Churches. There is a revived interest in the study of the Mystical Body of Christ, and a new spirit of approach to this holy mystery which holds in it a promise of precious fruit.

Some Relevant Quotations from the Report of the Edinburgh Conference, 1937.

The Church.

"We are at one on confessing belief in the Holy Catholic Church. We acknowledge that through Jesus Christ, particularly through the fact of His resurrection, of the gathering of His disciples round their crucified, risen, and victorious Lord, and of the coming of the Holy Spirit, God's almighty will constituted the Church on earth.

"The Church is the people of the New Covenant, fulfilling and transcending all that Israel under the Old Covenant foreshadowed. It is the household of God, the family in which the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man is to be realised in the children of His adoption. It is the body of Christ, whose members derive their life and oneness from their one living Head; and thus it is nothing apart from Him, but is in all things dependent upon the power of Salvation which God has committed to His Son.

"The presence of the ascended Lord in the Church, His Body, is effected by the power of the one Spirit, who conveys to the whole

fellowship the gifts of the ascended Lord, dividing to every man severally as He will, guides it into all truth and fills it unto all the fulness of God.

"We all agree that Christ is present in His Church through the Holy Spirit as Prophet, Priest and King. . . ." (p.230)

"A point to be studied is in what degree the Christian depends ultimately for his assurance that he is in vital touch with Christ upon the possession of the ministry and sacraments, upon the Word of God in the Church, upon the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit, or upon all of these." (p.231)

"The Church then is the body of those on whom the call of God rests to witness to the grace and truth of God. This visible body was, before our Lord came, found in Israel, and is found now in the new Israel to which is entrusted the ministry of reconciliation. To this visible body the word 'Ecclesia' is normally applied in the New Testament, and to it the calling of God belongs. It is the sphere of redemption. Apart from the Church man cannot normally attain full knowledge of God nor worship Him in truth." (p.231)

"The function of the Church is to glorify God in adoration and sacrificial service, and to be God's missionary to the world. . ." (p.233)

"The function of the Church is through the ministry of the Word and Sacraments, and through Christian education, to make them into convinced Christians conscious of the reality of their salvation." (p.234)

"We believe that every sacrament should be so ordered that all may recognise in it an act performed on behalf of the universal Church.

"To this end there is need of an ordained ministry recognised by all to act on behalf of the universal Church in the administration of the sacraments." (pp. 242, 243)

The Eucharist.

"We all believe that Christ is truly present in the Eucharist, though as to how that presence is manifested and realised we may differ. Every precise definition of the presence is bound to be a limiting thing, and the attempt to formulate such definitions and to impose them on the Church has itself been the cause of disunity in the past. The important thing is that we should celebrate the Eucharist with the unfailing use of bread and wine, and of prayer and of the words of institution, and with agreement as to its essential meaning.

"If sacrifice is understood as it was by our Lord and His earthly followers and in the early Church, it includes, not His death only, but the obedience of His earthly ministry, and His risen and ascended life, in which He still does the Father's will and ever liveth to make intercession for us. Such a sacrifice can never be repeated, but is proclaimed and set forth in the eucharistic action of the whole Church when we come to God in Christ at the Eucharist or Lord's Supper. For us the secret of joining in that sacrifice is both the

worship and the service of God; corporate, because we are joined to Christ, and in Him to one another (I Cor. x:17); individual, because each one of us makes the corporate act of self-oblation his own; and not ceremonial only, but also profoundly ethical, because the keynote of all sacrifice and offering is 'Lo! I come to do Thy will, O God.' We believe also that the Eucharist is the supreme moment of prayer, because the Lord is the celebrant or minister for us at every celebration, and it is His prayers for God's gifts and for us all that we join. According to the New Testament accounts of the institution, His prayer is itself a giving of thanks; so that the Lord's Supper is both a 'verbum visibile' of the divine grace, and the supreme thanksgiving ('eucharistia') of the people of God." (p.244)