

A PAPER PRESENTED AT A MEMBERS' MEETING OF THE EVANGELICAL ALLIANCE  
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"PRESUPPOSITION ABOUT THE CHURCH IN THE JOINT COMMISSION PROPOSALS"

by Canon D.W.B. Robinson.

The Joint Commission Church Union was set up by its three constituent churches in 1957. It produced its first report The Faith of the Church in 1959. A second document entitled The Church: its Nature, Function and Ordering appeared in 1963. This document comprises the second report of the Commission (originally foreshadowed as The Structure of the Church), together with the Proposed Basis of Union for the three churches.

So far as I can judge, the terms of reference of the Joint Commission (Faith p.5) did not include any examination of the reasons for wanting church union, nor any statement of motives for wanting to amalgamate these three particular denominations. Nor does the statement of "The Decision to Unite" (Church p.71) contain, strictly speaking, a reason for the decision; it merely states that the three churches enter into union "in fellowship with the whole Church throughout the world and seeking that unity which is both Christ's gift and His will for His Church".

There does not seem to be in the first report any explicit statement of why the Commission thinks the three denominations should unite. But on p.11 of the second report we read: "It is the deep conviction of the Commission that God is calling our churches into union with each other as one step in His plan to bring His divided church a growing unity which will express to the world the reality of His reconciling love". This is perhaps the clearest statement of motive in the whole work of the Commission. Note, therefore, the view of the church which it implies. God's church is at present divided. But He has a plan to reunite it, and one step in that plan is that the Presbyterian, Methodist and Congregational denominations should enter into union. God is in fact calling them to do this. God's church (it is implied) is something bigger than, but still of the same sort of structural and temporal character as, a denomination or group of denominations. This view is presupposed in the whole scheme of the report on The Church: its Nature, Function and Ordering. Adjust your denominations to each other; see that the ministry, worship, witness, service and government within the new structure is as it should be, and you will have the church of God, no longer divided, but united and "whole" as He wills it to be.

A further reason for the union scheme is implied in the Preface to the Basis of Union, where it is stated that the churches (meaning I think the three denominations) "are being called to enter more fully into the faith and life of the whole Church". This reason is the one which underlies (though it is not explicit in) the first report on The Faith of the Church. Throughout that document there is much talk of the need to "enter more fully" into the faith of the church. It seems to be axiomatic that you can only enter more fully into the faith of the whole church through the structural unification of denominations. Again, therefore, the church must be thought of as an organized structure larger than, but still of the same general character as, a denomination.



On the whole, the Commission echoes the famous remark of Archbishop William Temple: "I believe in one holy catholic church, and sincerely regret that at present it does not exist". It does not exist, for, instead of "whole" church, we have a "divided" church, and divided precisely because of the existence of denominations. The best we can do is to "discern the lineaments of the holy catholic church within the limitations of our denominations" (Church p.75). But given certain improvements of a more or less defineable kind, the whole church, or the one holy catholic church, may be expected to emerge as a visible entity in the world, a demonstrable unity to the eyes of external observers, no longer "divided", and its parts no longer "separated". Such an expectation, it is claimed, is the will of God, and it was for such a unity that Jesus prayed in John 17.

The assurance with which this view is held is shown by the fact that the proponents of the union scheme regard their proposals as a response to a call from God. Now it is always difficult to resist people who claim the clear guidance of God for their course of action. Those who are asked to comment on the proposals are put into an awkward position. Presumably we are asked to comment only on the details, not on the validity of the basic motivation. But there is little point in discussing details if the whole presupposition is astray. And it is in the conviction that the presupposition is astray that I offer the comments of this paper.

The concept of the church underlying these reports is not so much a coherent doctrine as a presupposition. It is nowhere set out, expounded, analysed or defended. No authority for it is cited. It is, however, a concept especially dominant in the old style SCM/ecumenical theology which, if I am not mistaken, is characteristic of the circles in which these proposals have their origin. Let it be thought that my point of view is purely individual, let me quote some words of the distinguished leader in the ecumenical movement, Dr. Henry Van Dusen. In an article in the Ecumenical Review on "The Significance of Conciliar Ecumenicity" (April 1960), he refers to the fact that "that issue which might be expected to be fundamental to all Christian unity discussions and prior to all others has, until quite recently, been almost wholly by-passed. It is the question: What is the ideal unity of Christ's Church?". "To be sure, for great numbers of churchmen the nature of the unity of the Church in its ideal realization is not an open question. Christian unity means membership within one institution, the Church of Christ. Indeed, a major difficulty in achieving an ecumenical consensus in the matter is precisely the extent to which those who hold this conception tend to regard it as axiomatic, under-estimating when they do not disregard the numbers and strength of conviction of fellow Christians who reject what seems to them beyond question. They assume that, in due time, all Christians will 'return' to the only valid conception of the unity of the Church, i.e. their own conception". Dr. Van Dusen points out that this conception is held not only by "catholic" writers, but by Bishop Lesslie Newbigin. He goes on: "This is not the place to examine the validity of this interpretation (i.e. Newbigin's interpretation of N.T. teaching). It is sufficient to query whether St. Paul ever envisioned a 'visible, corporeal unity' of the kind which is in the minds of those who look toward a single institutional Church of Christ as the ideal for the corporate life of His followers on earth. The main point is: this conception and the biblical interpretation upon which it is based are unequivocally rejected by a large, and steadily increasing, proportion



of the most ardent devotees of Christian Unity", (Van Dusen's italics)s).

It seems quite clear that the proposals before us are based on this same presupposition about the nature of the church and its unity of which van Dusen says that it is "unequivocally rejected" by many. I would hazard the opinion that it is unequivocally rejected by evangelicals, for example, as well as by others. Since the Basis of Union has been designed with an eye on Anglicans and in hope of the Church of England (at least) joining the scheme before long - by 1988, according to the gestatic prophecys of the last meeting of the Australian Council of Churches - it is important that those who are not happy about the root of the proposals should say so in an unmistakable way, and not give the impression that they are only worried by a few details.

I am not a historian, but it has long seemed to me that the concept of the church which we are considering is really that of medieval catholicism. It is certainly not that of the New Testament or of the early Fathers. I am somewhat fortified in this by some words of Dr. Hermann Sasse used in connection with a similar type of document.

"The first question to be raised is whether the idea of a 'Reunited Church' which underlies the whole document is tenable or not. It presupposes that there has been an 'undivided church' the unity of which has been lost and is to be restored. The deepest reason why this theory has been generally accepted as self-evident by all British Christians is to be found in the history of Britain. The one medieval church which still existed in the beginning of the 16th century on the British Islands had to go through a long process of disintegration, especially in England. The great problem of this branch of Christendom, therefore, is 'Home Reunion'. Since the divisions were mainly caused by divergent views on the order of the church (Papalism, Episcopatism, Presbyterianism, Congregationalism) or at least found their expression in doctrines on church order, it is easily understood that suggestions with regard to the order of the church and especially to a ministry generally accepted, are regarded as the means of achieving the union. It is difficult for Christians brought up in this tradition, and even for theologians among them, to see that this experience of one particular branch of Christendom has helped to shape the ideas of an 'Ancient undivided Church' and a 'Future reunited Church'. Dr. Sasse goes on to point out that historically 'an undivided church has never existed'. 'Even in the first centuries there was no undivided church. If a pagan in the second, third or fourth century wanted to join the church he had, like a pagan in the modern world, to take his choice between several communions each of which claimed to be the Church of Christ, or to be the 'catholic' church'.

This historical comment is salutary, and another should be added. Historically, the appearance and growth of denominationalism, at least in British Christianity since the Reformation, has been accompanied by very great blessings. It has proved a safeguard for the conscience and Christian liberty of believers, bringing an end to the pernicious practice of religious persecution; and it has stimulated individual and corporate activities by Christians in missionary and other fields in an unprecedented degree. It is probably true, also, that the strength of interdenominational movements, both in missionary and other spheres, is directly due to the situation made possible by the system of parallel denominationalism.



By what criteria, after all, are denominations to be judged? By all means let us agree that they should be judged by the way in which they assist or hinder the true expression and functioning of the church of Christ. We can understand why, on the Joint Commission's concept of the church as a single, ecumenical, temporal institution, denominations should be judged to be an impediment, and even sinful. But if you take the view of the 39 Articles that "the visible church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men in which the pure word of God is preached" etc., and judge the denominational system by the extent to which it fosters the exhibiting of the true marks of the church - especially preaching the pure word of God - within the congregations which adhere to its standards and order, then you may well take another view altogether about the value of denominations. Many denominations came in existence precisely to safeguard the possibility of true churches existing at the local level. Insofar as they have continued to safeguard this possibility, we should not easily discard or despise them. No doubt particular denominations have their faults, especially where they impose improper restrictions on the life and liberty of churches, but they are not sinful per se. We must be certain that their positive virtues will be preserved if we consider any new arrangement. We must also ponder the dictum that the unitary denomination (i.e. the single large denomination) is always a persecuting denomination, prone to suppress (by whatever means are appropriate to the day and age) deviations from its writ.

These, however, are largely historical considerations. Let me return to the theological question of the church.

The concept of the church in these reports, which I have suggested is also that of medieval catholicism, is this: the church of God is (or will be, or should be) a single, earthly, visible, temporal institution. True, this temporal church has also a divine character, as in the Roman view. It has Christ as its head, and the Spirit as its life. This is its "duality". (See Church p.16). The first essential in the nature of the church is said to be "her continuity with the history and life of Israel" (Church p.16). This presumably means that the church should present the same sort of unitary, visible aspect to the world as did historic Israel. Certainly the church is said to be "a truly temporal institution". Always the large, world-wide institution seems to be presupposed. In the very important section of the report on the nature of the church (pp.12+99) there is no mention at all of the church in a particular or local sense. (Language about the church is often ambivalent, and "the church" can often be construed in a distributive sense, but to the best of my ability to judge, it is not used distributively, or ambivalently, in these reports.) In fact, there is very little in the reports at all which reflects a concept of the particular church. When it is mentioned, there is the reluctance one usually finds in discussions of this kind to use the word church at all. It is the "local congregation". I would be the last to regret the use of the word "congregation" in this connection, and regret that Tyndale did not win the day in substituting "congregation" for "church" throughout the New Testament. But I draw attention to the implications of the distinction drawn between "church" and "congregation". It is "the church" that the Commission wants to see emerge, not the congregation. If they would use "congregation" throughout, they would see at once the false and contradictory nature of the "church" on which they have set their hopes. I do not remember noticing that the particular congregation is anywhere called "the church" in these reports (not, e.g., on Church p.11), although it is said on



p.86 of Church that "a congregation is in its own particular area the embodiment of the one holy catholic and apostolic Church". It is a pity that this concept is not explored further. Nevertheless, even here it is only called a "congregation", despite the fact that the new denomination itself is cheerfully referred to as the "Uniting Church". This continued use of the term "church" for a denomination is one of the strange features of the thinking in these proposals. Even on the Commission's idea of the church, such terminology is absurd. It would greatly assist clarity of thinking if the term church were dropped altogether, and if we used "denomination" when we meant denomination, and "congregation" or "assembly" when we meant congregation or assembly. If what we want to talk about is not a congregation or assembly (i.e. if it does not congregate or assemble), then it certainly cannot, in the biblical sense, be called a church.

The concept of the church as a world-wide temporal institution seems to have coloured the Commission's ideas about "The Faith of the Church". For the "faith" is no longer the original revelation "once delivered to the saints" - in fact it is explicitly suggested (Faith p.32) that "the Church in any given time or place is incapable of articulating the Faith in its fullness" - but it is the sum total of what is contained in a certain selection of creeds, liturgies, hymns and confessions as well as scripture. A world-wide church apparently requires a world-wide deposit of faith. Although a certain singularity is conceded to scripture in one place on p.33, there are other places where scripture is little more than the other "deposits". We are told that the faith "has been delivered to the saints" (p.29), but in this context it has not been delivered "once for all" (hapax). For the means whereby God draws near to us are not only in Scripture, but "in the teaching and worship of the Church, and in the formularies of men of other days". In the second report (p.89) the Commission says that Christ is speaking to us not only through the Scriptures but through the traditions of the fathers.

I do not wish here to discuss the difficulties which are inherent in this view of Christian doctrine, except to note that this whole approach to the question of the "faith of the church" seems to be dictated by the underlying assumption about the nature of the church as an ecumenical institution whose various traditions, even in its divided state, have somehow to be made to add up to the "fullness" of the church's faith.

In the Proposed Basis of Union itself, there are two references to the Church which reveal the basic presupposition which we have been speaking of, and which at the same time illustrate the confusion of thought about the church which characterizes the whole report.

On p.777 there is the statement that "the Uniting Church acknowledges with joy that she belongs to the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church". Of course, "church" is the wrong word here. As Broughton Knox has pointed out ("The Church and the Denominations", Reformed Theological Review, June 1964, p.52), the sentence should read "The Uniting Denomination acknowledges that she belongs to the Holy Catholic Church". But this then does not make sense, for it confuses categories. The Holy Catholic Church is made up of believers, men and women whom Christ has gathered to Himself. A denomination cannot belong to that body of Christ. Christ does not gather denominations to Himself. This sort of confusion runs all through this part of the report. The whole notion of the church expressed in this Preface, despite its tones of earnest piety, lacks intelligibility.



The second statement to which I draw attention is in the Confession page 89. (This is slightly revised from Faith p.39). "We confess one holy, catholic and apostolic Church, the fellowship of believers, of all the ages, in heaven and on earth"... So far, so good. This is the ecclesia sancta and the communio sanctorum which we have always confessed in the creed. But then we are asked to confess that this ecclesia "exists to fulfill in every generation the mission of preaching, teaching and baptizing all nations". This goes beyond any creed; and it is a confusion of categories. What can possibly be the basis of the view that the ecclesia sancta in its full and perfected aspect (which is the only aspect in which we confess or believe it) exists to preach, teach and baptize? The New Testament makes perfectly clear that preaching and teaching are gifts which Christ from His exalted throne gives to individual men, not to "the church". Indeed, they are given to men for the express purpose of building the church, the body of Christ, through the work of ministry (Ephesians 4:12,15,16). Apostles, prophets and teachers are not functionaries or delegates of "the church", but are set in and over the church as ministers of the Word of God, which is creative and regulative of the church. It may be that, in a loose sort of way, we have become accustomed to speak of "the church" doing this and that, when we really mean that individual Christians, or Christians acting together in their respective ministries and callings, do this and that. But to exalt this into a dogma of the church is an error of large proportions, and it is an error which remains undetected in the very foundations of the kind of thinking represented by these two reports.

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It is not my intention here to enlarge on what I believe to be the correct doctrine of the church. May I be allowed to refer you to the article by Broughton Knox mentioned above, or to my booklet "The Church of God: Its Form and its Unity". I append also Article 19 of the 39 Articles of the Church of England which contains, I believe, the biblical and ancient catholic view of the visible church as an actual congregation, together with two brief summaries of what I regard as a sounder view of the relation between the "holy catholic church" and the visible church than that presupposed in the Joint Commission's report.

The New Testament certainly teaches the duality of the one church, but, as distinct from the duality supposed in the reports, it is this: on the one hand there is the church "in the heavenly places", the congregation of all true believers, assembled by, and about, Christ in heaven, perfect and without blemish; an object at present not of sight but of faith, and an eschatological rather than a temporal reality. But the manifestation of this church on earth, its present, temporal and visible aspect, is - not some ecumenical structure which in its very nature could never be an assembly, a church, but - every congregation where two or three meet together having Christ in the midst. The question of the relation of such assemblies or the members of such assemblies to each other is important but entirely secondary, and subsidiary to the doctrine of the church. Such links, crystallizing maybe into the sort of denominational service-structures we have become accustomed to, may have their proper uses, but denominations are not churches, nor would the sum of them be a church. And to claim that a denomination is part of, or belongs to, the heavenly, perfected bride of Christ is a theological solecism. (-perpetrated, I regret to say, also in the opening sentence of the new constitution of the Church of England in Australia, though nothing hangs to it there).

I do not deny that there may be reasons of expediency why denominations might consider amalgamating though I do not find myself attracted by the kind of denomination envisaged by the Joint Commission and in any case could not subscribe to a number of its doctrinal positions (if the reports are a guide to those positions) e.g. on scripture, baptism and the Lord's Supper. But that is a matter of detail. If the basic concept of the church underlying these proposals is not sound, the whole edifice collapses; the motivation for the union disappears. If there is to be union, new proposals must start from another point. This we should make crystal clear.

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### Archbishop Usher.

The Church of God is one in respect of the inward nature of it, having one Head, one Spirit and one final state. But outwardly there be as many churches as there be congregations of believers knit together by special bond of order for the religious expression of the inward nature. Yet though there be many visible churches, there is but one catholic and universal church, of which not one shall be lost, and out of which not one shall be saved.

(Body of Divinity)

### Dean H. Ware.

There is, first, the one great body, of which St. Paul speaks in the epistle to the Ephesians as the Body of Christ, which is obviously not confined either to any one of such particular churches as those which the apostles founded, or to any single community existing on earth and at any one time, but is composed of all who in every age have been united to Christ their head, by His Spirit. They are His members, and they will be found, at the consummation of all things, when Christ is revealed in His full glory, with all His saints, to form one vast organism, in union with him, each with his place, his gift, his office, and his special blessings. But this church .. is and always has been invisible.

.. any congregation of Christians who have received Christ's word and have been baptized and who continue in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship and in the breaking of bread and prayers is a church of Christ. Though not forming, either individually or in combination, the one church of Christ, they are the visible bodies out of which the one invisible body is being evolved, and in ordinary circumstances it is through union with one of them that our union with that invisible body is effected and maintained.

(Protestant Dictionary, sub. Church)

### Article XIX Of the Church.

The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in the which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly ministered according to Christ's ordinance in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same.

As the Church of Jerusalem, Alexandria, and Antioch, have erred; so also the Church of Rome hath erred, not only in their living and manner of Ceremonies, but also in matters of Faith.