

Introduction

In the *Report of the Third World Conference on Faith and Order*, held at Lund, Sweden, in August, 1952, the section entitled “Christ and His Church” began with these words:

We believe in Jesus Christ our Lord, who loved the Church and gave Himself for it, and has brought the Church into an abiding union with Himself. Because we believe in Jesus Christ we believe also in the Church as the Body of Christ.

Then the Report went on to show that the relation between the Church and Christ is grounded on and derives from the saving work of Christ.

For He, in His incarnation, death and resurrection, has entered into oneness with man in his estrangement and in his existence under the judgment of God, and by making atonement for man’s guilt has consecrated a new and living way in which man, reconciled to God, may live in union with Jesus Christ. Through Him God has given to lost humanity a new beginning, for in that Jesus Christ died and rose again, all who believe in Him die and rise again to a new life.

The union thus forged between Christ and His people created the Church, in which Jesus Christ through His Spirit so lives and dwells that He refuses to be without His Church, and His Church has no existence apart from Him.

Thus Christ is never without His Church; the Church is never without Christ. Both belong inseparably together, the King and His people, the keystone and the temple, the Head and the Body. As members of His Body, we are made one with Him in the fellowship of His life, death and resurrection, of His suffering and His glory. For what concerns Christ concerns His Body also. What has happened to Christ uniquely in His once-and-for-all death and resurrection on our behalf happens also to the Church in its way as His Body. As the Church is made a partaker in the crucified Body of Christ, so also it is given to be partaker in the risen Body of the same Lord. This means that the Church is

called to continue the mission of Jesus Christ to the world, so that the way of Christ is the way of His Church.

That I believe to be the proper theological procedure in any approach to the doctrine of the Church and the many problems that confront us to-day in regard to our understanding of its nature and mission, provided that at every point we remember that the Church is subject to Christ and can never usurp His place, and provided that, even when we say that the Church is called to continue the mission of Christ, we do not mean that it is prolonging His atonement or continuing His redeeming work, but that it is sent out into the world to serve Him who only is Saviour by proclaiming the Word of reconciliation: "We beseech you in Christ's stead, Be ye reconciled to God."

That is not only the proper procedure for a doctrine of the Church but for all theological doctrines. For the way that God has taken with us in the Incarnation of His only Son, the way in which He has willed to reveal Himself and to save us, is not only the only way of our salvation but the only way of all our knowing of Him. That way has been revealed to us in the Holy Scriptures, so that we must turn to the way of the Incarnation as set before us in the witness of the New Testament, and follow carefully the way of God's revealing and reconciling work in Jesus Christ, if we are to cut behind our errors and conflicts and find again the way to truth and unity in the one Lord. That was well put long ago by Hippolytus writing against the heresy of Noetus:

There is, brethren, one God, the knowledge of whom we gain from the Holy Scriptures, and from no other source. For just as a man, if he wishes to be skilled in the wisdom of this world, will find himself unable to get at it in any other way than by mastering the dogmas of the philosophers, so all of us who wish to practise piety will be unable to learn its practice from any other quarter than the oracles of God. Whatever things, then, the Holy Scriptures declare, at these let us look; and whatsoever things they teach, these let us learn; and as the Father wills our belief to be, let us believe; and as He wills the Son to be glorified, let us glorify Him; and as He wills the Holy Spirit to be bestowed, let us receive Him. Not according to our will, nor according to our own mind, nor yet as using violently those things which are given

by God, but even as He has chosen to teach them by the Holy Scriptures, so let us discern them.

Hence the Lund Report adopted the only right and proper theological procedure when it went on to say:

On the ground of the apostolic witness to Jesus Christ, the Lord of the Church, and in obedience to Him, we seek to penetrate behind the divisions of the Church on earth to our common faith in the one Lord. From the unity of Christ we seek to understand the unity of the Church on earth, and from the unity of Christ and His Body we seek a means of realizing that unity in the actual state of our divisions on earth.

That is surely the Christian way, and the profoundest way, to deal with our disagreements. But let us note what it involves. To approach the problems in this way means that our disagreements must come under the judgments of Christ, for the very oneness of Christ condemns division; but if the doctrine of Christ includes His Cross, as indeed it does, then in the very heart of Christology we are provided not only with judgment upon our divisions but with the mighty act of God which assumed upon Himself the sin that separates and divides and contradicts in order to overcome it and set it aside in reconciliation and recreation. It is in the saving work of Christ as well as in His Person that we must look for the oneness which God bestows upon us, and which alone can solve our theological and ecclesiastical divisions, for in the heart of those divisions there is sin, and not least the sin of refusal to acknowledge it.

Now if common agreement in the doctrine of Christ as Saviour and Lord is to be the basis for the agreement that is to be realized in the midst of our present disagreements, then we must set to work again in a major way to wrestle with the profound issues of Christology and Soteriology. That is surely what the Ecumenical Movement is driving us relentlessly to do, and as it does that it reveals that there are two major errors and temptations against which we must do battle: (1) the dissolution of Christology and the displacement of Christ by man; and (2) the mythologization of the Church and the obscuring of Christ by the Church.

Both these errors have assumed powerful expression and

command wide allegiance in our day. The first has its most obvious expression in the movement from Schweitzer and Harnack (in their very different ways) to Bultmann, which lays the axe to the very root of the Incarnation as the coming down to earth of the Son of God Himself for us and our salvation. For all his disavowal of it, in Bultmann the Liberalism of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that set aside the Being and Person of Christ, as not of central importance, in favour of an inwardness of spirit and a modern way of life, has reasserted itself in a form that is a direct menace to the Apostolic and Catholic faith in Jesus Christ. This dissolution of Christology results also in the dissolution of the Church (*Entkirchlichung*) and in the rise of a detached and aesthetically-minded secularism. The other error has its most obvious expression in downright mythologization of the Church as a *Christus prolongatus* so characteristic of modern Romanism, but also so rampant in the Baroque spirituality of many Anglo-Catholics. In the Roman form this error is hitched to the mythologization of the Virgin Mary, and in the Anglo-Catholic form it is part of a new mystique that has its supreme expression in the episcopate. But this is by no means confined to these, for it flourishes in many of the so-called "Free Churches", especially in the new world where it assumes very different forms. But, wherever this error is found, the pre-eminence of the Person of Christ as Saviour and God is obscured by the Church, whether in its institutional forms or in its social manifestations.

Both these errors lead to the same result: the displacement of Christ by man. That is just as clear in the Roman form in which through the direct identification of the Church and Christ it is finally man's desire and man's voice that predominates, as it is in the Protestant form in which through the identification of the, decisive act of God and man's existential decision Christology is ultimately replaced by anthropology. Karl Barth was therefore fundamentally right in pointing out the close parallel and kinship between the thought of Bultmann and that of Rome. Rome identifies Revelation with its own subjectivity just as much as the Protestant individualist – indeed it was from mediaeval Romanism that this modern subjectivism so rampant in the Neo-Protestantism of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries derived, as Harnack frankly

admitted; not through the Reformation, but through Anabaptism and kindred movements that emerged out of the mystical pietism of the Roman Church.

History will surely reckon the road that Neo-Protestantism has taken from Lessing to Bultmann as the *reductio ad absurdum* of this pietistic element in Protestantism. Certainly the Ecumenical Movement has made it impossible for the Evangelical Churches to take that road, for the Ecumenical encounter forces the Churches to think through their agreements and disagreements in the light of the whole history of the Church, and therefore directs the Churches back more and more to the central dogmas of the Apostolic and Catholic Church. Schweitzer and Bultmann will always be regarded where they actually are now, on the fringe of the Church. That is not to say that their challenge is to be set aside, for demythologization has more and more point when we face the mythologization of Roman theology or the new mythologies of modern science. It is from that angle that the real danger lies in the Ecumenical encounter to-day, which more and more forces us to face our differences in the doctrine of the Church, and to seek to reach agreement. We must undertake that, but never, surely, in such a way as to allow the Church to displace the Person of Christ or to obscure His Face, and never in such a way as to allow the sacramental enactments in the Church to assume priority over the mighty acts of God in Christ, which is what they always tend to do when they are thought of as something in addition to, and therefore in some sense as other than, the finished work of Christ. Besides, that involves a strange failure to realize that Jesus Christ clothed with His Gospel is ever really present in the midst of His Church on earth, so that His finished work is abiding and effective reality in it from generation to generation. He does not need to be made “present”, and His work does not need to be made “real”.

It is very necessary for us to-day to wrestle with the doctrine of the Church in the same way that the early centuries wrestled with the doctrine of Christ, but we must not yield to the temptation to think of the Church as an independent hypostatic reality. It was not the Church that was pre-existent and became incarnate; it was not the Church that was assumed into

hypostatic union with the Deity; it was not the Church that was crucified for our salvation and raised for our justification; it was not the Church that ascended to the right hand of God the Almighty (which is what the Roman dogma of the assumption of Mary implies) – but Jesus Christ alone, the Only-Begotten Son of God. We must formulate the doctrine of the Church therefore as His Body, and His Servant, not in any sense as an *alter Christus*.

Now it is precisely because this danger has been noted, the danger of a masterful ecclesiology, that the suggestion has been made that we must seek rather to emphasize the doctrine of the Church as the manifestation in humanity correlative to the gift of the Spirit, the sphere described by God's people where God's Spirit is at work. And that is a fundamentally true aspect of the doctrine of the Church, and certainly no doctrine of the Church can neglect the doctrine of the Spirit. But this is also the very point where Roman and Protestant theology have in the past been led into serious error, both of them, in different ways, in identifying the Holy Spirit with the human spirit: in the Roman Church with the "uncreated soul" of the Church, in Neo-Protestantism with the man's "higher nature". That is why there came about such an astonishing approximation between the views of both in the late nineteenth century: in regard to the spiritual consciousness of the Church as the vehicle of Revelation and as indeed Revelation itself at work in the soul of the Church, and therefore in regard to the nature of theology as the systematic expression of the mind of the Church in its awareness of the divine. But when there is added to this the historical consciousness of the Church, then it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the *Heilsgeschichte* (salvation-history or redemptive history) is identical with the developing mind of the Church throughout the centuries. In that way again Neo-Protestant ideas coincide pretty closely with Roman ideas.

Now the decisive fact in the doctrine of the Church in relation to the Spirit is the *filioque* clause of the Creed, which asserts that the Spirit does not speak of Himself but only reveals what Christ had already taught His disciples; that Revelation was fully complete and whole with the Incarnation, Resurrection, and Ascension of Christ, and that nothing could be added to it;

and therefore that throughout the history of the Church the Revealing work of the Spirit is bounded by the particularity of the Incarnation and the form of the Incarnate Word, the historical Jesus. A doctrine of revelation and inspiration in the Old Testament Scriptures must doubtless work with the correlativity of the people of God with the work of His Spirit, so that Revelation is bound up with the history of that people, and the *Heilsgeschichte* with the acts of that people. In the Incarnation, however, the Spirit uttered the One and only Word of God, and that was a full and final Revelation. Thus in the New Covenant a doctrine of revelation and inspiration has to work with the fundamental and absolute importance of the Humanity of Jesus Christ, for with the Incarnation the *Heilsgeschichte* is bound up exclusively with Him. All the mighty acts of God have taken place in Christ, and we await only His final Parousia; the Church lives between the penultimate and the ultimate acts of the *Heilsgeschichte*.

Thus Church history cannot be identified with the *Heilsgeschichte*, although all through the history of the Church the *Heilsgeschichte* is effective and operative, being identical with Christ clothed with His mighty acts. The doctrine of the Church must be formulated therefore as a correlate of the doctrine of Christ, for the Church is the Body of Christ, not the Body of the Spirit – it was not, after all, the Spirit but the Son who became incarnate and gave Himself for the Church and affianced it to Himself as His very own. Moreover, if we take the *filioque* seriously, as the Roman Church has never really done, then we cannot intrude into the faith of the Church extraneous elements, natural theology and mythology, derived not through the Incarnate Word or Son of God (*filioque*). In the last resort it has always been a “second source” of revelation or knowledge that has corrupted the Church or led it astray. Here once again the Roman tradition as a second source of Revelation (and its natural theology) and the Neo-Protestant “spirit of man” as a source of natural theology (and its historical consciousness) coincide, while the rank growth of mythology in Roman Mariology has its Protestant counterparts in the mythologies of the Pentecostal sects and “the German Christians”. If the Church is thought of only as the Community of the Spirit then it is impossible to inhibit the idea

of a continuing revelation in the Church, and difficult to prevent the Church from deviating seriously from its apostolic foundations. Only if the Church's relation to the Spirit is through the Incarnate Word or Son, only if we take in utmost seriousness and with the fullest rigour the doctrine of the Church as the Body of Christ, can we prevent that, and preserve the integrity of the Church in Christ.

On the other hand, the doctrine of the Spirit has its indispensable place, for when it is allowed to be superseded or dropped out of sight the Church comes to be more or less identified with a hierarchic institution operating with a false objectivity, and the whole conception of the Church as a communion of love, a fellowship of people living the reconciled life, is suppressed. It is the doctrine of the Spirit that inhibits the imprisoning of the life of the Church in a *codex iuris canonici*, that destroys the idea that the grace of God is bound to the sacramental elements, that makes impossible the conception that divine mysteries can be controlled and manipulated by man, and therefore that keeps the Church open to the renewal of its mind and lifts it above the downward drag of the spirit of the times. But this is the Spirit of Truth poured out upon the Church by its ascended Head and Lord, and He it is who directs the Church away from itself to find its true life and being above in Christ alone.

It is thus the doctrine of the Church as the Body of Christ that must engage our attention, but that means the subordination of the Church at every point to Christ Himself; it does not mean that the Church occupies the centre of our attention but Christ alone. It is not therefore ecclesiology that is of primary importance, but Christology. That is why it is more and more imperative that the doctrines of the person and of the work of Christ should engage our full attention, even when pressing problems of ecclesiology bear down upon us. Nothing must be allowed to decentralize the Gospel – the Church is but a poor earthen vessel bearing the heavenly treasure, and it is the heavenly treasure that counts, not the earthen vessel. The great Apostle Paul, for all his high consciousness of his apostolic office, was profoundly aware of that. God intended that Paul's converts should see him as a blear-eyed man of mean appearance, just in order that they might not be tempted to confound

the heavenly treasure with the earthen vessel; God kept him in the weakness of the flesh, therefore, that though death worked in him, life might abound in those to whom he preached the inestimable riches of Christ. There we have the supreme picture in the pages of the New Testament of the attitude and behaviour of the apostolic Church in Christ. Only if we are prepared to take the same line in the Church to-day, refusing at any point to exalt the Church as an end in itself, that Christ may have the pre-eminence in everything, can we reach agreement where we are so deeply divided: in the doctrine of the Church. But this means that behind that must lie full and deep agreement in the doctrine of Christ Himself.

Unfortunately the traditional confrontation of the Churches in the Ecumenical Movement has thrown the doctrine of the Church, comparatively speaking, into too great a prominence. We are learning again that the Church is part of the Creed, and that the doctrine of the Church can be formulated as an article of saving faith only within the context of faith in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; but we are trying to deal with it before we have gone deeply enough together into the second member of the Creed, faith in Jesus Christ. In the whole field of Christology, however, we have been given a magnificent lead in the teaching of Karl Barth, especially in his *Church Dogmatics IV*, “The Doctrine of Reconciliation”. We have behind us also more than a century of the most exhaustive examination of the New Testament documents with the most phenomenal recovery of a vivid faith in the historical Jesus Christ – surely one of the great facts of all Church history – and now we have the rising tide of theological exegesis and a rigorous and constructive biblical theology. Ours must be the task of learning together again how to confess, like the early Church, faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour and God in all its breadth and length and height and depth, and therefore in the overflowing love of God. Only in that glorification of God the Son and in actual engagement in the mission of the Gospel can we produce, as a *parergon*, a doctrine of the Church in which our differences are lost sight of because they are destroyed from behind by a masterful faith in the Saviour of men.