

Problems of Faith and Order

1. Amsterdam

The Nature and Mission of The Church¹

A Discussion of Vols. I and II of the Preparatory Studies²

The *Universal Church in God's Design*, and *The Church's Witness to God's Design*, the first two volumes written in preparation for the meeting of the World Council of Churches at Amsterdam, are an ecumenical event in themselves. They form the most significant attempt at combined thinking about the nature and mission of the Church that has yet taken place. The stage is now set for a fresh and exhaustive inquiry behind the present divisions among the Churches into a biblical and Christological doctrine of the Church which may yet knit into a theological unity the agreement of the Churches reached at Amsterdam. After all "the only valid argument for the union of the Churches is theological, a belief that unity is the will of God for His Church, and that the Church as the Body of Christ ought to represent on earth the mysterious unity of the God-head" (Vol. II, p. 202). The purpose of this essay is not so much to review the actual material presented in these volumes as to face the questions they raise and, if possible, to point the discussion farther along the road to that theological unity.

We are confronted at the very outset with the fact that the pressure for visible unity, for a re-catholicization of the Churches, has not come so much from the professedly "catholic" sections of the Church as from the "evangelical" movements burdened with fulfilling the mission of the Gospel

1. From the *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 1949, pp. 241-70.

2. Four Volumes of Studies prepared for the First General Assembly of the World Council of Churches at Amsterdam, August 22 to September 4, 1948, and the Official Report edited by W. A. Visser't Hooft. S.C.M. Press. 12s, 6d. each volume.

to the whole world.³ The great impetus in the Ecumenical Movement has been decidedly missionary. That is not to say that evangelical experience and action have taken precedence over theological conviction, for side by side with this evangelism and at the very heart of its obedience to Christ there is going on a renewal of the great convictions of the faith such as we have not seen since the Reformation. It is just here in evangelism, as Oliver Tomkins says, that doctrine and practice meet (I, p. 135). Nevertheless these have yet to be integrated at the ecumenical level. That means on the one hand that “the problem of the Church’s world mission is the crisis of the Ecumenical Movement. If an Ecumenical Movement is not primarily a strategy of world-wide evangelism, then it is nothing but an interesting academic exercise” (II, p. 116). On the other hand it means that “there is still in much of our ecumenism a strong element of relativism and of lack of concern for the truth of God” (Visser’t Hooft, I, p. 183). Nevertheless the hope of the situation is that “the Church in the churches insists on asserting itself. Wherever two or three are gathered together, the *Una Sancta* is in the midst of them and demands to be manifested” (I, p. 185). When that happens as it did at Amsterdam there are signs that something new is about to take place, especially when it is evidently accompanied by the overmastering conviction that Christ far transcends all our theological formulations and that there is an essential unity of the one flock of Christ in spite of the disobedience and failures of the historical Churches.

If therefore theological unity at the ecumenical level seems to lag behind actual fellowship in the evangel, that may not mean a lack of reflection but rather that the wholeness of Christ and the given unity of His Church press so heavily upon the sundered Churches in the hour of their coming together and renewal that they are thrown into a divine uncertainty about traditional formulations of the faith, and cannot use them in order to express the essential unity of the faith. In other words it is precisely the unity of the Church in Christ Jesus conceived as an eschatological reality that both interpenetrates history and transcends it, as a given unity even in the midst of disorder

3. “Catholic” and “evangelical” are used here and throughout as in the Amsterdam Report, p. 52.

and as a promised unity beyond it, that has brought the Churches together as far as Amsterdam and yet has prevented them from snatching too hastily at a visible unity.

That such a stage has been reached is of the greatest significance. The persistent difficulty has been that from each side of a fundamental division, such as that between “catholic” and “evangelical”, people see the Christian faith and life as a self-consistent whole, while the two conceptions of the whole are actually inconsistent with each other. If the realization of the given unity is strong enough, however, it will surely entail an eschatological suspension of the confessionalism behind these conceptions of the whole, and at the same time mean a shattering of theological relativism. Then room will be created among the Churches for ecumenical thinking in the proper sense – that is to say for a corporate thinking “with all saints” of the breadth, length, depth and height of the love of Christ which passes knowledge through which the Churches may reach out to be filled with all the fulness of God in Christ. Ecumenical thinking might well be described as *Eucharistic thinking*, not that primarily in which we offer of our own traditions and efforts toward a common pool, but an ever-new and thankful *receiving* of the Body of Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 14: 5 and Eph. 4: 12-16) “till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ; that speaking the truth in love we may grow up unto Him in all things who is the head, even Christ.”

The thought of the Eucharist is not of the labour of our hands in producing the bread and bringing it to the altar – that would be the sacrifice of Cain – but of receiving the one Body given and broken for us. It is the thought of one loaf broken into a multiplicity of fragments of which we partake, and yet partake in such a way that we are incorporated in the unity of the one Body. In the receiving of this one sacrifice and its unity into our multiplicity healing is given for our divisions. Nevertheless it is an eschatological unity which we shall only receive fully when the sacrament yields place to the marriage supper of the Lamb in the final consummation of the mystery concerning Christ and His Church. Until He come we receive that only sacramentally in the tension of the Cross, holding

together the unity of the visible and the invisible, the material and the spiritual, the temporal and the eternal, by faith, but still waiting for the redemption of the body in the resurrection. This unity cannot therefore be perpetuated in the structure of space and time, any more than the transfigured Christ or the Christ of Emmaus can be constrained to perpetual abiding in an earthly tabernacle or institution. He is, so to speak, the vanishing Christ who must be received again and ever again in the Eucharist and shewed forth in His death until He come in glory. As often therefore as the Church partakes of the Eucharist she receives judgment upon her multiplicity and divisions, and receives too the earnest of the unity that shall be and that already is. The experience of the Church cannot be anything else therefore but “as dying, and behold we live; as having nothing and yet possessing all things” (2 Cor. 6:9, 10). The fact that we have sacraments in the Church means that unity is hidden with Christ in God, and yet that we are given participation in this unity as we receive the Word and the Body of Christ in the Gospel and Sacraments.

The full thought of the Eucharist and of the eschatological unity of wholeness which it mediates bears several important implications for ecumenical thinking.

(1) If the given unity of the Church is essentially eschatological then the validity of all that she does is conditioned by the Parousia and cannot be made to repose upon any primitive structure of unity already complete in the naturally historical realm or upon any continuity in the fallen world out of which we are redeemed. “Like the Incarnation itself, the Eucharist is the breaking into history of something eternal, beyond history, inapprehensible in terms of history alone.”⁴ So we must think of the validity of the Church’s ministry, of her councils and theological formulations, not in terms of history alone but in terms of a divine act which entails the eschatological suspension of all earthly validity. The Church is a divine reality and cannot be demonstrated as a divine reality in the actuality of history except by a divine act. “At no time and no place is the Church an authority which upholds itself out of itself.”⁵ To the divine authority the Church can only bear witness by word and

4. Ramsey, *The Gospel and the Catholic Church*, p. 107.

5. Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, p. 146.

obedience and must never cite it after the fashion of the Scribes and Pharisees (II, p. 22). It is understandable that when the early Church was faced with the dangers of Gnosticism it should appeal to an actual succession of bishops to attest the historicity of its claims, a function which is much better performed to-day by historical criticism, but it is a complete misunderstanding to transmute linear or chronological sequence into a theological principle. Nor on the other hand can a tactual succession of bishops be made to usurp the function of Baptism, which is the supreme eschatological act whereby we are initiated into the once and for all historical events in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.⁶ The very existence of sacraments in the heart of the Church ought to have protected her from this misunderstanding, inasmuch as the validity of our salvation, of our ministry, and of our faith is by baptism made to rest upon the unrepeatable events of Jesus Christ on the one hand, and yet thrown into the future by the Eucharist on the other hand. True sacramental thinking entails an entirely different conception of validity from worldly or historical validity, for it is validity which is an act of God which we must receive sacramentally ever and ever again, and not a validity reposing upon the very thing that the sacraments are designed to transcend. The extraordinary thing is that because of episcopal succession the validity of baptism has been distinguished in sort from the validity of the Eucharist to the misconception of the latter. While the Eucharist is above all the sacrament in which we receive wholeness into our earthly tensions, designed as the medicine for our sinful divisions, it has been made to rest so much for its validity upon chronological sequence within history that it has actually become the great obstacle to unity among the Churches. Nothing could be more destructive of the real Eucharist than to make it separatist.

(2) If the given unity of the Church is essentially eschatological then there is ultimately no self-consistent whole in any historical tradition. Therefore it becomes the duty of each Church in the ecumenical fellowship to listen to the witness of other Churches, or as Dr. Visser 't Hooft has put it, to open herself to the truth of God that she may learn from them, and

6. Cf. Gaugler, Römerbrief, I, p. 154 f.

to be ready to let her own faith and life be enriched and corrected by this contact. "Churches cannot treat each other as if they were sovereign states which defend the integrity of their rights and territory. They must on the contrary rejoice when the ecumenical situation leads to constructive battles and beneficial invasions. The members of the one ecumenical family cannot adopt the principles of non-intervention. They let themselves be questioned by their fellow-members. They exhort each other to great faithfulness and renewal of life. They call each other back to the apostolic witness" (I, p. 192; cf. Skydsgaard, p. 165). That is indeed the great hope of the situation, that before one another the Churches have been driven back to the biblical witness and biblical theology, and that more and more there is taking place a subordination of tradition to Scripture. That even applies to the Roman Church, for example, in her rediscovery of the notion of the Church as the Body of Christ and of the eschatological element in the Eucharist (cf. I, pp. 116, 163, 171). Apart from the wide-spread revival in biblical studies and the new readiness of all branches of the Church to place themselves under the criticism of the Word, Amsterdam would hardly have been possible.

(3) In the light of the essential and given unity of faith it becomes the duty of the Churches in the ecumenical fellowship to think out every doctrine into every other doctrine. It is only thus that they will reach back to the most ultimate truths and put to a Christian test even their doctrine of God.⁷ There can be no doubt that such exhaustive theological work, particularly in the English-speaking world, is greatly needed if we are to get behind the secondary questions which are the immediate cause of our divisions. The coming together of the different Churches in constructive and mutual challenge has made it very clear that different doctrines in different traditions have suffered from arrested thinking and consequent distortion. Thus, for example, eschatology has been so thrust into the background again and again that in differing degrees in the different Churches almost all doctrines have suffered accordingly. Now that eschatology is being thought into the other doctrines of the faith bringing them nearer to the promised

7. Cf. F. W. Camfield, *S.J.T.*, 1: 2, p. 205.

unity in Christ, great differences are beginning to disappear. That is very apparent in the contribution of Professor Florovsky on the Nature and Task of the Church. This is a doctrine which has never received dogmatic definition in any of the great councils of the Church and has suffered perhaps more than most, particularly from a failure to receive Christological correction. Indeed it was precisely at this point at the Reformation that the Roman Church remained behind and separated from the Reformed Church which insisted on Christological correction of the doctrines of the Church, the Sacraments, and the Ministry. There are signs, however, as Professor Skydsgaard has pointed out so well, that “a new attentiveness is awakening, an inner investigation, a self-criticism, not of the Church as such, but of the exact form which the Roman Catholic Church has taken in the course of its empirical development, in which restrictions and prejudices have occurred, so that truly Catholic thought (which in this connexion means the whole and undivided Christian truth) has had an incomplete development” (I, p. 166). On the other hand, if the doctrines of Christ and the Church have themselves suffered from arrested development in the Reformed Churches, that is undoubtedly due to the failure to think eschatology into the whole. Nevertheless it is the great hope of the present, manifest everywhere in the Amsterdam reports, even in regard to the Church of Rome, that these three doctrines are being brought to bear upon each other from their biblical foundations and in such a way as to raise in our breasts the expectation that the hidden unity behind the Churches may at last spring into view (cf. I, p. 168). “It is only the unity which exists that makes possible the exploration of our differences. It is only the unity which we believe that God has already given which affords hope that the honest search for biblical truth will, not create unity, but more and more reveal it” (I, p. 17).

It is highly significant that Karl Barth, who more than any other in modern times has thrust the doctrine of the Church into the forefront of our thinking, was the one to suggest the procedure for discussion at Amsterdam: to examine agreements to discover what disagreements they contain, and then to examine disagreements to uncover their concealed agreements. The outstanding fact this brought to light was that

disagreements were but differences within a total unity, a unity which was both given and had somehow become *event* (*Ereignis*) in the midst of the Assembly – one of those ever-new acts of the Church's Lord about which Barth had written as creative of the Church (I, p. 67 ff.). Nevertheless the differences were wide enough and were apt to become entrenched behind the historical division between "catholic" and "evangelical", more so in the discussion itself than in the volumes written in preparation for the Council. This entrenchment, although it brings to the surface in an honest and clear light the differences that must be faced, will nevertheless mean the ultimate failure of the World Council, unless the Churches themselves undertake to take up the agreements within the total unity, and push them through the whole region of their disagreements until there is no difference left of such a magnitude as to inhibit a confessional unity. In the rest of this essay we must face some of these agreements and disagreements as they concern the nature and mission of the Church.

1. The Nature of the Church

All were agreed that the Church is God's gift to men for the salvation of the world; that the saving acts of God in Jesus Christ brought the Church into being; that the Church persists in continuity throughout history through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit (V, p. 53; I, p. 213). The differences that arose within this agreement were considerable, but might not have been so great had some of the ultimate problems been faced. What is meant, for example, by the divine nature of the Church? How are we to think of the divine and human elements in relation to each other? To that question only a Christological answer can be given, and yet there seems to have been no real attempt to think out the relation between the divine and human natures of the Church in terms of the relation between the divine and the human in Jesus Christ Himself. It will readily be agreed that we cannot think of the divine nature of the Church in the same way as we think of the divine nature of Christ, for in Him the union of God and Man is absolutely unique. And yet it is only on the analogy of the hypostatic union that we can begin to answer our question – that is by giving that relation an analogical extension into the