

Introduction

It is increasingly evident to-day that the lines of conflict and agreement in the Church coincide less and less with the frontiers of the historic Communion. That appears to be due in considerable measure to the resurgence of biblical theology and Christology in all the Churches, and may well be taken as an indication of the way ecumenical advance will take in the future. Thus new alignments are cutting through the membership of the existing Churches in a way that is bound to undermine denominational barriers and to bear positive fruit in growing reunion.

On the other hand, it still remains true that the conflict is most acute and agreement is most difficult in regard to what is called “the means of Grace”.¹ The reason for that probably goes back to a distinctively Western habit of mind that grew up in the Dark and Middle Ages when undue prominence was given to practical and institutional questions and Latin pragmatism and Christian Gospel came to be compounded together in the daily life and mission of the Church. Thus the traditional Faith tended to be codified in the rational structures of the Church and Grace tended to be institutionalized in canonical forms for its easy ministration to the multitudes. In this highly pragmatic consciousness the Church was regarded as the Ark of Salvation equipped with the means of Grace for the salvation of souls, and in it the ancient Roman genius for organization, administration and deployment of resources found new scope for expression and development.

It was thus that the Roman Church grew up, but it grew up in such a way that the content of the faith was permanently tied to modes of thought deriving from the ancient world, and

1. The very expression “means of Grace” is difficult and misleading, for it brings Grace into the realm of *means and ends* where some object is to be attained or some result achieved, and so it opens up the thought of its administration. In the New Testament Grace is never related to Baptism or the Lord’s Supper, and is only once associated with the Spirit (Heb. 10:29).

the evangelical ministrations of the Church were channelled in dogmatically defined ways and means in accordance with unchangeable patterns in the institutional structure of the Church. Thus when the Church came under pressure from within for the renewal of its life and faith in the Gospel, the tension was most severe wherever the renewed life and faith broke through its encasement in the dogmatized and canonized patterns of thought and ministry. The tragedy that came over the Roman Church was that it failed to realize that the mediaeval modes of thought and patterns of life, which had served their purpose for centuries, had only a limited range of applicability, and when absolutized or invested with final authority could quickly become demonic like the principalities and powers or the *ἐξουσίαι* of which the New Testament warns us, and from which we can be redeemed only by the Blood of Christ.

The Reformers found themselves faced with an extremely difficult situation in their attempt to restore the face of the ancient Catholic Church, for the complete intransigence of Rome, culminating at last in the Council of Trent, left no alternative to a break in which each side found itself forced to barricade itself behind a total exclusion of the other. The fact that the Reformers had to do battle with the Roman Church over the means of Grace, that is, at the point where the Gospel had been tied down in the tradition to inflexible institutional forms, meant that the whole question of the means of Grace was given a place of undue prominence in the Evangelical Churches themselves, so that they were tempted over against the Counter-Reformation and over against one another to seek and claim justification for themselves in their practical manifestations and in the modifications and changes they introduced into the mediaeval institutions they had inherited. Thus the theological issues came to be confused with *post hoc* rationalizations of historical events, and justification by Grace alone was denied in practice by a form of self-justification.

That is what happened in the late sixteenth and in the seventeenth centuries when comparatively peripheral questions, significant though they were, were thrust right into the centre and given a distorted importance in the Evangelical Churches, and they settled down into hardening institutional structures over against one another. What could be more revealing in this

respect, as we look back upon it, than the action of the Westminster Assembly which sought to impose by Parliament a uniform pattern of faith and ecclesiastical government upon the Churches of the United Kingdom? Is it any wonder that the Church of England on its part has barricaded itself behind institutional structures that have become increasingly adamant, and that this in turn continues to provoke hardening reaction on the part of its sister Churches? On all hands we have repeated the failure of the mediaeval Church to see the limited nature and sanctity of many institutional patterns, and in claiming to fight for essentials we have often betrayed them by confounding them with time-conditioned forms that rarely have historical support from the New Testament or even the Early Church.

In view of the present state of inter-church relations among the Evangelical Churches there are three questions, among others, for which I would like to press for immediate and more careful consideration.

(1) *Fundamentalist notions of the ministry.* By “fundamentalism” I do not refer to loyalty to the Gospel and the Word of God as delivered to us in the Holy Scriptures, but to the binding of this to fixed forms or set modes of interpretation that in themselves have no essential relation to the Gospel or the Word of God. There is, for example, a “fundamentalist” interpretation of Holy Scripture that is tied to rationalist, philosophical forms of thought deriving from the seventeenth century, but there are also “fundamentalist” notions of the ministry that are tied to man-made traditions and time-conditioned notions of the seventeenth century or earlier. There are Churchmen, for example, who appear to believe in the verbal inspiration of seventeenth century Presbyterian conceptions of the ministry, in spite of the fact that they do not stand up well to criticism on the ground of biblical exegesis or historical evidence now available from the Early Church. But perhaps nowhere is this intransigent “fundamentalism” more in evidence than in some of the champions of Anglicanism, who are prepared to accept exact, scholarly handling of the Scriptures, but who are not prepared to extend that treatment to their peculiar notions of “the historic episcopate”.

(2) *Justification by Christ alone.* Justification means that we are

put in the right with God solely through Jesus Christ, that only in Him are we clothed with righteousness. Therefore it calls in question and relativizes all else that claims to be righteousness. Because we believe in justification by Christ alone, we believe that He and He alone constitutes the Church His Body, that He alone sanctifies it in Himself, and gives it Truth and Grace, and that He alone gives it the Ministry of the Gospel. Only in Him may we look for justification anywhere in the Church's life and work. Therefore we can never justify ourselves or demand justification from one another without betraying Christ or usurping His prerogative. But when one Church calls in question the orders of another, is it not seeking to justify itself over against it? and when the other demands recognition of its orders, is it not renouncing justification by Christ alone and seeking honour of man rather than of God? This is the *damnosa inheritas* of Latin Mediaevalism that is still with us – by tying the ministry of the Gospel to time-conditioned institutions, we give pragmatic questions a dominant place which distorts and obscures the Gospel. When debate takes this form, justification by works replaces justification by Grace, and the whole Gospel is at stake. Justification by Grace means that pragmatic considerations cannot be put in the centre, either through insisting on them or through opposing them unduly, without disastrous betrayal of Grace.

Justification by Christ alone means that in all ecumenical discussions Jesus Christ must be allowed to occupy the central place, that we begin only through unreserved committal to Him and allow ourselves to be guided throughout by what such committal may involve.

(3) *Intercommunion*. Nothing can be more heart-rending than the way advocates of so-called “open Communion” or of “reunion before Communion” seem to be manipulating division at the Lord's Table in order to achieve their own ends. On both sides of this issue there is apparent a deep failure to understand the nature of division at the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ, and the outrage to Christ it involves. If we are really ready to seek reconciliation in Christ we cannot but enter upon Intercommunion as soon as possible, and, in and through the forgiven and healed relation to Christ which it mediates, work together towards *fullness* of Communion

between, the Churches. How can we sit down at the Lord's Table and then refuse to act out in our body and blood what we have received in communion with the Body and Blood of Christ, that is, refuse to act out reconciliation in the whole of our physical life and work in the Church? Therefore how can Churches sit down separately at the Lord's Table to proclaim the death of Christ till He come, when by their very separation they are acting a lie to reconciliation through the Blood of Christ?

On the other hand, the argument given by so many of our Anglican brethren seems equally to indicate failure to feel deeply enough the outrage of schism in the Eucharist. Thus it is argued against engaging in Intercommunion as part of the way to unity that "since the Eucharist is an offering in history of the memorial of redemption, it can only be offered by those who are historically at one". But does that not mean (except perhaps to the wilfully blind) that no Church which is separated from another Church can offer the memorial of redemption in its separation? To use such an argument against Intercommunion, while not using it against Communion, can only be a form of sinful pretence, while to insist on this argument and yet to hold separated Communion is only to eat and drink judgment. Surely we must recognize frankly that on both sides of this question we are deeply involved in sin, and that arguments advanced from out of that sinful separation are inextricably intertwined with self-justification and with rationalization of disunity.

What is absolutely imperative is that we repent, without waiting for repentance on the part of the other, and resolve together, without laying down conditions for the other, to seek reconciliation in Christ, and so take into our hands the holy means He has provided for repentance, forgiveness, healing, reconciliation, and unity; and then and ever after resolve to work out, in obedience to reconciliation in the Body and Blood of Christ, all that it entails for those incorporated into Him. Anglicans and Presbyterians alike might do well to study the illuminating work on unity in Communion, called *Brotherly Reconcilement*, written by Egeon Askew in 1605 and presented to James I as a contribution toward healing division – that in the seamless coat of Christ schism may be sewed up, men in orders

brought into order, that God may be served in verity by His Church, and the Church be preserved in unity until the coming of His Son Christ Jesus unto judgment.

It is with the same prayer that the essays collected in this volume are offered to the Church, and with the desire on my part to learn more and more from my brethren through their criticism of these pages. These essays are not controversial, but are meant to be irenic and constructive, in the hope that they may help to clear some ground for agreement. Nothing like a systematic account is given in them of the Ministry or the Sacraments, so that perhaps I may be permitted to direct any who are interested to the new edition of *A Manual of Church Doctrine* by Wotherspoon and Kirkpatrick for an interpretation of Church, Ministry and Sacraments, as held in the Church of Scotland.

SAMPLE