

INTRODUCTION

At the ecumenical conference of Amsterdam (1948), it appeared that the knottiest of theological problems in regard to the reunion of the churches arose from the doctrinal opposition between Catholicism and Protestantism.¹

The catholic position implies the continuity of the Church, its institutional character and the many consequences which result from that fact—a sacramental idea of the ministry, the value of tradition, the emphasis (no doubt under various forms) on apostolical succession.

The protestant position stresses, on the other hand, the liberty of the Holy Spirit, the ever-renewed initiatives by which God in His Word judges, corrects, sustains, recreates and consoles His Church, the universal priesthood and the charismatic nature of all forms of the ministry.

In the following study we would like to point to certain aspects of the New Testament witness which may make a useful contribution to this ecumenical debate. If the New Testament, along with the Old Testament of which it is the fulfilment, is the canon and rule of the Church, we shall try to consult it with so much the more objectivity, detachment and hope because the questions at stake are so much the more vital and controversial.

We have purposely refrained from exceeding the limits of a New Testament study. In our concluding section, we have confined ourselves to indicating the conditions under which the exegetical results arrived at would be valid for systematic theology and ecclesiology: we have not, however, developed those results dogmatically. Such dogmatic exposition, necessary as it is, can only be attempted on the basis of canonical testimony, from which it must stem. To prevent as far as possible the examination of the New Testament witness being disturbed by the desire or fear of ensuing consequences, it is of the highest importance to concentrate one's attention, in the first place, upon the New Testament data themselves and upon them alone.

A further word about the bearing and the limitations of historical hypotheses for Biblical theology. With regard to Christology, the apostolate and the Church—theological subjects with which we shall be especially concerned—as with regard to the New Testament as a whole, certain New Testament data have often been considered to be the term of a process of development, or even the expression of a later theory very different from the original facts. In several concrete cases,² we shall see that certain historical hypotheses sometimes raise more problems than they solve. But that is not the point, so far as Biblical theology is concerned. Ingenious, and probable or not, historical hypotheses belong to a different category from that of theological study. In exalting as its guide the Canon of Scripture, the early Church did not intend to canonize only the point of departure of ecclesiastical and theological development, but the entire trend of this development (including the later theories, attested by canonical texts, which might be an integral part of it) up to the close of the canonical period.³ No one will deny that historical study, with its inevitable and legitimate share of conjecture, is essential for the understanding of this development. But what the Church and the theologian will refuse to do is to trust in historical study for the decision as to what is canonical and what is no longer so. That decision has been made once for all. The Reformed Church above all, so justly proud of the Scriptural basis of its theology, will do well to remember it.