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Towards A United Church*

The Story of the Reunion Movement, 1910-1947

BY CANON R. W. HOWARD, M.A.

I.

IT was from the mission field that the first great impetus towards Reunion in this century was to begin. At Edinburgh, in June, 1910, the climax was reached of a long process of coming together. In this process youth had played a conspicuous part. The Student Christian Movement, with its brave watchword—"The Evangelization of the World in this Generation"—had not only drawn together the younger leaders of the Christian Church throughout the world. It had realised increasingly how impossible was the fulfilment of this watchword by a divided Protestant Church. So to this great world Missionary Conference came 1,200 delegates from the mission field. They met, not on an undenominational basis, but on the *inter-denominational* basis already hammered out in the councils of the Student Christian Movement. They represented a wide range of Christians from many countries and churches. They met, in the tension in which is the essence of the oecumenical movement: the tension between full loyalty to one's own convictions and tradition and the desire for maximum co-operation. One Commission dealt with "Co-operation and the Promotion of Unity." Of great importance was the appointment of a Continuation Committee, with Dr. John Mott (Conference Chairman) and Mr. (later Dr.) J. H. Oldham (Conference Secretary) as its executive officers. The Edinburgh Conference also led to the organization, in 1911, of the Conference of Missionary Societies in Great Britain.

It was increasingly realised, however, that the task of world-wide evangelization was bound up with the problem of ecclesiastical union. Accordingly, a few months after the Edinburgh Conference, another important step towards worldwide Christian unity was taken, largely on the initiative of Bishop Brent, of the Philippines, when the World Conference on Faith and Order was initiated by the Protestant Episcopal Church of the U.S.A. at its General Convocation in October, 1910. It sought the co-operation, at a conference for the consideration of questions touching Faith and Order, of "all Christian Communions throughout the world who confess our Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour." The Anglican Archbishops appointed a co-operating committee to watch the progress of the plans for this world Conference. The 1914-18 war delayed the scheme, but in 1920 Bishop Brent presided, at a preliminary conference at Geneva, over representatives of seventy churches from forty nations. The topics discussed were: "The Church and the nature of the United Church" and "What is the place of the Bible and a Creed in relation to reunion?" The Orthodox Churches were represented, a Continuation Committee was

* An abridged version of Canon Howard's Presidential Address at the Oxford Conference of Evangelical Churchmen, April 21-23, 1947.

appointed, and literature on reunion in many languages was published.

The first full World Conference on Faith and Order was held at Lausanne in August, 1927, with Bishop Brent as Chairman. The object of this memorable meeting, which was to be a spiritual as well as an ecclesiastical landmark, was "to register the apparent level of fundamental agreements within the conference and the grave points of disagreement remaining; also to suggest certain lines of thought which may in the future tend to a fuller measure of agreement."

There were 400 persons present at Lausanne. All the churches sent their ablest representatives. They included twelve Archbishops, twenty-two Bishops—Orthodox, Anglican and Old Catholic—and an equally important representation of non-episcopal churches. Professor Ménégoz of Strasbourg University estimated the conference thus: "Three things appeared clearly to the eyes of those taking part in the conference. First, the surprising ease with which . . . Christian souls understand each other and unite within the sphere of Faith as lived; then, the no less extraordinary obstacles which appear whenever one tries to adjust the differing ecclesiastical doctrines and constitutions of which the resolutions of the Conference made an honest and clear exposition; finally, the ardent and irresistible desire of those who had shared both these experiences to maintain and intensify the union of hearts in spite of all hindrances, and to reach out, by ways that are still rather sensed than clearly discovered, towards an ever broader extension in the visible world of the dimly perceived unity of the Churches of Christ." A Continuation Committee carried on its work.

Meanwhile, Christians everywhere had been coming to the conviction that it was not only in research into "Faith and Order" that they must co-operate, but in life and work; making the fruits of their unity available "as well for the body as for the soul." The leader in this field was Archbishop Soderblom, of Upsala. It was largely due to his initiative that, under the auspices of the "World Alliance of the Churches," a World Conference on Life and Work drew five hundred representatives from thirty-seven nations, representing all Christian communions except the Roman Catholic, to Stockholm, in August, 1925, where the delegates considered the Church's relationship and responsibility towards the economic, industrial, social, educational and moral problems of our age.

In the years immediately preceding the war, the tempo of the reunion movement was increased yet further. Four important conferences met in 1937, 1938 and 1939. In July, 1937, the Stockholm Conference on "Life and Work" was succeeded by a second world Conference at Oxford, under the title, "Church, Community and State"; the rise of the National Socialist (Nazi) movement in Germany having made this a vital issue. The report of this Oxford Conference—"The Churches survey their Task"—is a document of exceptional vigour and depth.

A month later, in August, 1937, the Second World Conference of Faith and Order assembled at Edinburgh. 123 churches were represented by 504 persons. Their aim was (a) to affirm the underlying unity of the Churches which springs from loyalty to Christ, and (b)

to study and report to the churches the progress made through joint studies towards overcoming the obstacles to full unity.

After Oxford and Edinburgh in 1937, it was agreed that these two strands of Life and Work and Faith and Order should be spliced in one "World Council of Churches." Its first world assembly, which was planned in 1938 but delayed by the war, is due to meet in the summer of 1948. But the Council is already in full activity.

Yet a third important world conference took place, a few months before the war, in December, 1938, at Tambaram, near Madras : a missionary assembly, in direct succession to the Edinburgh Conference of 1910, and the Jerusalem Missionary Conference of 1928. It is noteworthy that, whereas at Edinburgh, in 1910, only about a dozen delegates came as nationals of the younger Churches, at Jerusalem, in 1938, one third were from these churches. At Tambaram, in 1928, the delegates were equally divided between missionaries and nationals. The uniqueness of the Gospel of Christ, and the obligation of national churches to do their own evangelistic work, were emphasised at this conference ; and the menace of totalitarianism was faced as an imminent issue. How imminent, was to be proved by the outbreak of total war, only a few months later.

The last great conference, a Christian Youth Conference, was held on the very eve of the war, at Amsterdam, from July 24 to August 2, 1939. 1,500 young people, from seventy national groups in all parts of the world, met to worship, to study the Bible daily, and, under the banner of "*Christus Victor*" which hung above their meeting, to face Christ's claim to be the Lord of all good life and the only bond of union able to unite nations and churches alike.*

II.

The problem of time and space, so inescapable for the modern philosopher, compels me to pause at this point and take stock. Some of you will be asking two questions : Where does our own Anglican Church fit into the world picture just given ? And, amid the luxuriant undergrowth of oratory and discussion which this age of conferences so easily produces, can we detect any solid harvest of church unity actually achieved ?

I must try, however briefly, to answer that fair twofold challenge. I will take the second first. I can only mention certain important developments which in the present century have led either to the amalgamation of kindred churches into one organic unity or to the status of inter-communion between Churches. The list is surely impressive. The United Presbyterian Church in Scotland combined with the Free Church in 1900 to form the United Free Church of Scotland. Minor branches of the Methodist Church in Great Britain were amalgamated in 1907 ; and the three main branches—the "Wesleyan", "Primitive" and "United"—became the "Methodist Church" in 1932. In 1925, in Canada, the Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian Churches were merged in the United Church of Canada (one-third of the Presbyterian Churches dissenting). In

* The World Conference of Christian Youth has just taken place at Oslo, July 22-31, 1947.

October, 1929, the Church of Scotland and the United Free Church achieved corporate union. In 1927 was formed the Church of Christ in China, comprising Baptist, Congregational, Methodist, Reformed, United Brethren and the Canadian Churches. In the U.S.A., among several substantial acts of union the most notable was the union, just before the war, of the Methodist Episcopal Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church South, and the Methodist Protestant Church, into one Methodist Church with a membership of 8,000,000 persons. Other unions of non-episcopal Churches have taken place in France, Bulgaria, Korea, Madagascar, the United States and South America; and, though under political pressure, in Japan. The Convention of Episcopal and Presbyterian Churches in America, last September, did not accept the proposals for a union put forward by their own respective commissions on the basis of some years of joint discussion; the scruples of Episcopalians apparently proving too strong. The proposals were referred back for further consideration. Definite proposals have also been made for the union of the Episcopal and Presbyterian Churches in Iran. Such acts of union as have occurred constitute welcome evidence that the trend in organised Christianity is towards unity; they also reduce the number of small churches, and prepare the way for larger unions in the future.

All other movements towards organic union, however, are eclipsed by the great scheme for Church Union in South India. It is quite impossible to do justice to its history in a few paragraphs; but here, in outline only, is the story of it. In May, 1919, thirty-three ministers of the (Anglican) Church of India, Burma and Ceylon and of the South India United Church met at Tranquebar and prepared a statement on Church Union. This led to the appointment, in 1920, of a joint committee of these two churches which was joined by representatives of the Methodist Church. A scheme was completed in 1929. It included a constitution for a United Church in South India. This constitution would recognise the Episcopate, the Councils of Presbyters and the Congregation of the Faithful as having their places in the order of life of the United Church. All bishops and ministers of the uniting churches would be acknowledged as bishops and ministers in the United Church, with certain limitation as to where such ministry might be exercised; the arrangement to apply for thirty years as a probationary period. The Lambeth Conference of 1930 blessed the scheme in principle. After revision, it was approved by the governing body of the Church of India, Burma and Ceylon, in February, 1945, and by the South India United Church, in the autumn of 1946. On January 22, 1947, historic steps were taken. The General Council of the Church of India, Burma and Ceylon finally ratified its acceptance of the scheme, as interpreted by the Joint Committee in 1946. Sixteen dioceses were delineated. Plans were made for the nominations for election of bishops, by March 1 (1947); the names of those selected were to be announced on April 15. The inauguration service was planned for September 24, 1947. The three uniting Churches comprise over one million adherents, of whom nearly half are Anglicans, the greater number of these owing their spiritual heritage to the C.M.S.

Many of us know how strenuously this great movement has been opposed by some elements in some of the churches represented, our own included. Most of us here will see in it the overwhelming and urgent direction of the Spirit of God. We shall watch it with prayer and with hope. For it may bring to our own Anglican approach to the problem of unity just the encouragement and evidence we need.

III.

Let us now consider that approach, as we conclude our survey. And first let me remind you of the new status of recognition or of intercommunion with other Episcopal Churches which has been brought about for Anglicans in this century. They include these achievements: the acceptance in 1922 and later of the validity of Anglican Orders by the Patriarchates of Constantinople and Jerusalem, and by theologians of the Orthodox Churches; the presence of an official delegation of Orthodox Prelates at the Lambeth Conference in 1930, and the notable and conspicuous part taken by them in the Conference Eucharists and other services at Canterbury, St. Paul's and elsewhere, as previously in the Nicene Council Commemoration of 1925; and the establishment at many points of happy and brotherly relations between the Churches.

Reunion, with full inter-communion, has been actually accomplished with the historic body of Continental Old Catholics (who recognised Anglican Orders in 1925), *i.e.*, the Utrecht succession in Holland, as reinforced from Germany, Switzerland and elsewhere since the Vatican Council of 1870. What may be described as a treaty of amity was concluded in 1932, and in that same year the Archbishop of Canterbury and Old Catholic Bishops united in the Consecration of four Anglican bishops, two of whom were the Bishops of Jerusalem and Gibraltar.

The Lambeth Conference of 1920 accepted the conclusions of its Committee, appointed in 1908 in regard to the Church of Sweden, "on the succession of the Bishops in that Church and the conception of the priesthood set forth in its standards," and a rather guarded form of inter-communion was sanctioned. In the same year two Anglican bishops assisted at a Swedish Consecration.

Conversations between the Church of England and the Church of Finland, in 1934, and the Churches of Latvia and Esthonia, in 1938, have led to formal agreement on the subject of the ministry and to the decision of the Church of England to admit to Communion individual members of these churches.

When we turn to the difficult problem of the Anglican Church's relationship to the Free Churches, especially in Great Britain, we find that there has been goodwill in abundance—but only limited achievement. And yet it certainly has not been for want of trying. Three main types of Anglican approach must be described.

The first is that of the Lambeth Conference, in its successive meetings. This "Quadrilateral" of Lambeth, in 1888, laid down the four-fold basis which the Anglican Bishops thought necessary for reunion: the acceptance of the Scriptures as the standard of faith and practice; of the two chief sacraments; of the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds; and of the historic episcopate.

The important Lambeth Conference held in 1920 closely followed a war in which clergy and ministers serving together with the forces had realised the crippling effects of disunion. Men everywhere were prepared to welcome the message of its "Appeal to all Christian People," issued with the practically unanimous approval of the 252 bishops present. This appeal produced a deep impression in all parts of the world. It explained what the Bishops meant by the Catholic Church; expressed the hope that the ancient episcopal Communion in the East and West and the non-episcopal Communion might be led into unity; confessed a share in the guilt of division; asked for an adventure of goodwill and faith, and sketched a basis for the united Church. It concluded by asking for mutual deference to conscience, the expression of readiness to receive a commission or recognition from other Communion, and a readiness "to make sacrifices for the sake of a common fellowship, a common ministry, and a common service to the world."

The Lambeth Conference also passed resolutions approving the action of bishops in giving occasional authorisation to ministers not episcopally ordained to preach in Anglican Churches and admitting to Communion in special circumstances baptised but unconfirmed communicants of non-episcopal Churches which are working towards the ideal of unity contained in the Appeal. The upper Houses of the Convocations of Canterbury and York subsequently adopted resolutions bearing on this subject.

The Lambeth Appeal was carefully considered by the Free Churches, though they demurred at the proposal that episcopal ordination (required by Anglicans, to convey "due authority," not "spiritual efficacy") should be imposed on men acknowledged to be in the ministry already.

The Lambeth Conference of 1930 had important dealings with leaders of the Orthodox Churches. The Free Churches, however, were disappointed because this conference did not implement the statement of a Church of England Committee in 1923 that "the ministries of the Free Churches are real ministries in the Universal Church."

IV.

The Conference of 1930 was followed up by emphasis on the second of the main activities of the Anglican Church toward reunion—the holding of joint and careful collaboration with leaders of the Free Churches. This had gone on for many years. Two important documents now came from such joint action, and must be mentioned here. In 1934 appeared *A Sketch of a United Church*: a memorandum shewing how the episcopal, presbyteral and congregational systems of church order could be incorporated in the order of a united Church. Still more important was the publication, in 1938, of the joint *Outline of a Reunion Scheme for the Church of England and the Evangelical Free Churches of England*. Its main principles were these. Unity must be compatible with variety. Episcopacy was accepted for the united church proposed, but presbyters should assist at ordinations, and the laity should help to select candidates; there would be no

disowning of past non-episcopal ministries. Variety in form of worship would be permitted. Legislation would rest with a harmony of bishops, presbyters and laity.

The third activity of the Anglican Church, though last in my order, is by no means the least important. Indeed, I should regard it as being one of the main arguments for the emphasis on episcopacy which bulks so large in all discussions of reunion. I am thinking now of the leadership of individual bishops and archbishops, and of their considered pronouncements on the subject. Only very briefly can I even touch on them. Archbishop Davidson, like Archbishop Lang, was an earnest believer in, and worker for, the ideal of a united Church. One great leader in Reunion has passed to his rest since our last Oxford Conference—Bishop Headlam. His great book, *The Doctrine of the Church and Reunion*, the Bampton Lectures for 1920—mark the date—had a profound influence not only on the Lambeth Conference which made its great "Appeal" in that year, but upon all subsequent discussions of reunion.

Two Anglican Bishops, Bishop Woods of Lichfield and Bishop Bell of Chichester, have been untiring, alike in speech and action, in the cause of reunion, especially on its oecumenical side. May we not hope that Bishop Stephen Neill, who was at our last Conference, will also do a great work, treading in the footsteps of that great oecumenical leader, William Paton? Of William Temple our memory is still fresh and inspiring. Again and again, in utterances of profound depth, careful balance, and true Christian sympathy, he expounded the possibilities and faced the duty and the difficulty of organic union with our Free Church brethren.

V.

With two very important utterances on the subject, made by Archbishop Fisher, in 1946, I must bring my paper to its chronological climax and also to its closing challenge.

On March 27, 1946, when attending the Jubilee Congress of the Free Church Federal Council in Westminster Chapel, Dr. Fisher invited the leaders of the Free Churches to consider whether they wished to revive the question of reunion as a vital issue, so that any proposals they might desire to make could be discussed at the next Lambeth Conference, in 1948.

"Reunion, when it comes, if by God's grace it does, will be reunion of the Church of England," he added. "It will not be reunion with the Church of England by you. I want you to weigh that phrase. It will not be reunion with the Church of England; it will be reunion of the Church of England, for you and I were in origin the Church of England in this country, and in a real sense we still remain the Church of England in this country. When we come together we become again the Church of England. But now you would come into it with the traditions which you have developed in the period of dislocation, with your own customs, your own methods, and your own style of pulpit oratory. You have also your own hymn tunes and other things that matter in your daily life.

"Will all these things have to disappear in a reunited Church?"

I should say, Heaven forbid. Should the Free Churches lose all power of self-direction and identity with the past? Heaven forbid. I look forward to a time when, the Church of England having been reunited, the Methodists, Congregationalists, the Baptists and the Presbyterians will, within that reunited Church, still function with an identity of their own.”*

As recently as November 3, 1946, in a memorable sermon before Cambridge University, the Archbishop went even further than in March. His main point was that detailed constitution-making was a wholly inappropriate way to reunion in England; that a period of assimilation and growing alike was needed; and that a most fruitful way to secure it would be for the Free Churches to take episcopacy (which all had previously agreed would be part of a united church) into their own systems and try it out under their conditions. Together with this the Archbishop suggested that “each community should contribute the whole of its separate ministry to so many of the ministers of the others as are willing to receive it.” This would bring about a process of assimilation at the presbyteral as well as the episcopal level. He added, “If there were agreement on the whole venture I would thankfully receive at the hands of others their commission in their accustomed form, and in the same way confer our own.” Hence there would be a means of growing to full communion before the task of constitution-making was begun. It is good to know that, at the invitation of the Archbishop, the National Federation of Free Church Councils has agreed to appoint representatives to meet delegates from the Church of England to explore the present prospects for Church union in the light of the Archbishop’s appeal.

Let me close with an appeal uttered, centuries ago, by the great Saint Chrysostom, in his homily on St. John xiii. 35. He is shewing how the evangelism of non-Christians depends on Christian unity.

“Nothing so offends the Gentiles as the absence of love. How was this love shown? It was shown by men like Peter and John who were never separated but went up to the Temple together; by Paul, who was so kindly disposed towards them. They were endowed with other virtues, but even more with love, the mother of all good things. The Gentiles are moved, not by signs but by love, and nothing creates life like love.”

* *The Times*, March 28, 1946.