

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

Institutionalism and Church Unity

A REVIEW ARTICLE

BY GEOFFREY BROMILEY

INSTITUTIONALISM and Church Unity is the title of a symposium consisting of essays prepared by members of a special study Commission of the World Council of Churches.* The purpose of this Commission on Institutionalism is stated in the preface: to study institutionalism as it affects the churches, particularly, (1) the self-criticism of churches by which they may see their own structures sociologically as well as theologically; (2) the relations both positive and negative of the churches to each other in the ecumenical conversation; and (3) the pattern of church relations which is finding expression in the World Council of Churches as an institution. The findings of the Commission may be found in the Faith and Order booklet, *The Old and the New in the Church*. The present volume contains a selection of the work which went into the discussions and the making of the official report. With the report, it was sent to the Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order held at Montreal in July of this year.

A few words may be said about the contributors. There are sixteen of these, and nine come from the United States, with one also from Canada. Of the others, two are from Germany, one from Sweden, one from Japan, and two from Great Britain (Richard Hanson of Durham and John Kent of Manchester). Various churches are represented, as are also various academic interests. It should be pointed out that the contributors to the symposium are not identical with the members of the Commission, though there is, of course, some overlapping. The Commission consists of ten members: five from the United States, two from Canada, two from Germany, and one from Sweden.

The preponderance of American voices in this area will not pass unnoticed, and it should be pointed out that in the main their interests are far more heavily sociological than those of their associates. This is in keeping with many trends in American Christianity, and it is perhaps the reason why leadership is here distributed as it is. On the other hand, one may ask even in principle, that is, quite apart from the findings, whether this apparently sensible and logical arrangement is really in the best interests of this kind of study. Can the Church, or the churches, be viewed primarily from a sociological angle? Is it not essential that this type of work be done as a true study in the Church's faith and order, that is, from a predominantly theological standpoint, and that sociologists be called in only as consultants? As we shall see, there is a clear rift at this very point within the symposium itself, but the discussions very quickly move on to more exclusively practical

* *Institutionalism and Church Unity*. Edited by Nils Ehrenstrom and Walter G. Muelder. (S.C.M.) 378 pp. 35s.

concerns. From the standpoint of the orientation and balance of the volume, one can only conclude that it was a serious mistake to allow this sphere of study to pass into the hands of American scholars who may have some qualification in sociology but show very little grasp of the way that the Church's sociology ought to be biblically and theologically directed.

A glance at the contents will give point to this criticism. The work is divided into two main parts. Part I consists of Foundations, and is devoted to basic questions. Part II is made up of Case Histories, and presents a series of studies in actual mergers, or projected mergers, of churches—for example, the Canadian Union in 1925, the Methodist Union in Britain, 1932, South India, the Presbyterian-Episcopalian negotiations in the U.S.A., 1937-1946. Since these two parts are more or less equally divided, it might be supposed that there is fairly even balance between the dogmatic and the practical. But a closer review of the first part shows that this is not so. Apart from the introductory essay by Professor Ehrenstrom on the quest for ecumenical institutionalization, there are here seven papers, and of the seven only two, or at the most three, bear serious evidence of a theological approach. These are the contributions of Marsch of Wuppertal, Hanson of Durham, and possibly Dombois of Heidelberg. The other essays deal with real problems—for example, institution and church in North America, types of religious institutionalization, problems of church bureaucracy, but they fail to dig down to the true foundations on which alone there can be a proper understanding of problems of the super-structure, and on which alone proper reconstruction can be undertaken. In other words, even in the section on foundations we are already rushing ahead to practical questions, though not in the detailed form of the later case studies. Perhaps it would have been better to recognize at the outset that, if case histories are wanted, the work ought to fall into three parts rather than two. A third of it could then be devoted to genuine theological foundations, a third to implications in the field of order, and a third to actual situations studied in the light of the theological basis and its implications. As it is, the sociological study is not securely rooted in the almost non-existent theological, and the case studies do not stand out against any clearly delineated norms.

In fairness to the symposium, of course, it should be noted that Ehrenstrom, in his introductory essay, shows a fine awareness both of the need and also of the difficulties at this very point. Thus he asks what must be the relation between theology and sociology in this whole area. He claims that the present inquiry is trying to do justice both to the divine and the human nature of the Church. He sees that there must always lie behind this type of study the realization that the Church is both in the world and yet not of the world. He also sees that there is perennial difficulty in giving an explication of what this means. The Commission has obviously faced the fundamental questions, and in the second paper, that of Dr. Marsch on "The Concept of Institution in the Light of Continental Sociology and Theology", it seems as though we are to have profound and instructive consideration of them. But the rest of the work fails to follow up the lead which is here given. Even the first part moves on quite rapidly

to the complicated but less disturbing ground of more purely sociological discussion. A gesture has been made to theology. It has even been given a place of honour at the commencement. The Dean of the Faculty of Divinity is allowed to open the proceedings with prayer. But once the gesture is made, the serious business can then begin. Theological issues can be ignored as very largely theoretical. Sociology has enough theoretical problems of its own, but these are at least of more immediate and pressing concern. If progress is to be made at all, it is imperative that these be tackled at once and that guidance be given to the churches in the light of the ensuing discussion.

To engage in a detailed examination of the individual contributions, or even of a selected number of these contributions, is hardly possible in the space of a comparatively brief review. Perhaps the most constructive mode of criticism, then, is to indicate some of the points which cry out for the adequate treatment that seems to be denied them in the present study. In this way we may both indicate the vital weaknesses in the work of this Commission and yet at the same time suggest certain basic lines that they should pursue in order to bring their discussions to a more genuinely successful issue.

* * * *

Firstly, it seems essential that the preliminary question raised by Ehrenstrom concerning the interrelation of theology and sociology should be both discussed and answered. He puts the question as follows: "Does a study of institutionalism and church unity belong in a theological or a sociological frame of reference? Or is an integration of the two perspectives called for and possible?" The answer given is that in the light of the duality of the Church as both divine and human, an integration is both necessary and possible, and the intention of the Commission is to display this. But the further questions then arise as to what is meant by integration, what is the proper way to achieve this, and what is the order, if any, within the integration? In practice it is fairly obvious that within the work of the Commission integration means the absorption of theology into sociology. Hence, if we follow the Christological analogy, the present volume is a series of studies in essentially Nestorian ecclesiology. The humanity and human reference of the ecclesiastical institution are heavily over-emphasized at the expense of the "divinity" and divine reference. The tragedy is that this result seems to be very largely achieved by lack of thought rather than by deliberate choice. The contributors believe that they are achieving integration. But there is also the further tragedy that any criticism will almost certainly be condemned as Eutychian. Thus Ehrenstrom rejects the "doctrinal reductionism which refuses to take seriously the human elements in the Church's life, or if it acknowledges them it does not explore or explicate them except in doctrinal language".

The suggestion is that we must either follow the present pattern of integration by absorption or we are guilty of artificial separation. But is there not the further alternative that we may achieve integration by submitting our sociological investigation and recommendations to theological guidance? Is it not a fact that when we discuss the so-

called divinity and humanity of the Church these are to be seen, not in confusion or separation, but all the same in the right order? Does not the divine reference of the Church as the people of God take precedence of its human reference as an ecclesiastical phenomenon in the world? In other words, when the Church is truly the Church, is it not theologically rather than sociologically determined? While it is in the world, and may thus be subjected to sociological consideration, is not the distinctive and controlling feature the theological fact that it is not of the world? If the Church is seen otherwise, if it is presented and constructed predominantly as an institution, may this not be due ultimately to the fact that it is seen from the standpoint and under the control of a false theology? Is there not every reason that the Commission should begin again at this fundamental and decisive point, and refuse to proceed further until it has seen its way clearly in this matter?

Secondly, it seems no less essential that we should know what we are talking about when we speak of the divinity and humanity of the Church, and of the need to do justice to both without confusion or separation. In a sense this takes us outside the terms of reference of the present Commission. Work in this field was committed to the complementary group working on Christ and the Church. On the other hand, if this theological principle is to be invoked as the final basis of the approach to theology and sociology, it is clear that some elementary discussion of the question is demanded. Even a cursory examination will show that to apply the Christological analogy to the Church is helpful and instructive. Yet even a cursory examination will also show that the analogy will obviously carry with it points of unlikeness as well as likeness, and that great care is thus needed in its application. Thus Christ is God in a way that the Church can never be; the word "divine" needs qualification when used of the Church, and some theologians are prepared to argue that it would be better to speak here of divine-human and human rather than divine and human. Again, the nature of the unity is obviously different, at least in terms of the present life. One has only to recall the elementary fact that Christ's is a sinless humanity, whereas sinlessness is not an attribute of the human life of the Church, unless one attempts an abstraction along the line of Roman Catholic dogmatics. The upshot of these distinctions and qualifications is that the Church is what it is, in the world and yet not of the world, only by virtue of its faith relationship to Jesus Christ. And this carries with it the further point that the true order of its life can be determined only by reference to Jesus Christ and faith in Him. Faith and order cannot be dissociated. Nor can their order be reversed. The guidance that sociology can and should give on the details of church life in a given situation must be controlled by the fundamental theological principle that this is not just an abstract divine and human institution, but that it is the Church of Jesus Christ by faith in Him.

* * * *

Thirdly, it is essential that the relationship to the world be then worked out in terms of the life and crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In the world and yet not of the world is not just a slogan. It

is a phrase which takes us deep into the central aspects of the Church's life as a fellowship identified with the Lord in incarnation, death, and resurrection. Here again we must be careful to preserve the analogy. The Church is not the Word, the Son of God, made flesh. The Church does not die an atoning death. The Church does not rise again in this life by the same direct action of God as we see in the raising of Jesus from the tomb. Yet the Church is identified with Christ in incarnation, death, and resurrection. It is in the world. It must die to the world. It must express a life of resurrection in the world. Paul puts this very plainly in Romans 12 when he tells us that, while we are in the world, we are not to be conformed to it, but are to be transformed by the renewing of our minds.

Nor is this merely an injunction for the fashioning of individual life and conduct. It provides us with the basic theology for fashioning the life and action of the Church. It gives us a clue to the problem of the institution. In the world, the Church is forced to take the form of an institution which merges into the institutional background of the time, which undergoes relative changes with relative circumstances, which may be studied, criticized, amended, or even reformed from a sociological angle. Not of the world, the Church is the institution which refuses to be conformed to the world, which brings all its worldly forms under the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, which carries through a constant putting off of the old man, so that, even while it has to be feudal in a feudal age or bureaucratic in a bureaucratic age, it must always, if it is to be true to itself, subject these changing forms to the transformation of death and resurrection and never become their victim. Not of the world, the Church is the institution which still lives even though it dies, which finds its true life and power in the crucified and risen Lord who loved it and gave Himself for it, which cannot be conformed but which is not completely deformed, but continually reformed and transformed by the Word and Spirit, so that in and through its shifting institutional forms it is basically and primarily the Church of Jesus Christ engaged in the mission which He Himself has laid upon it.

The theology of the Church in relation to Christ is no abstract theorizing. It is a principle of criticism and reconstruction beside which the sociological assessments are, in isolation, trivial and ultimately irrelevant. To approach the problem of the institution along any lines which do not allow for this theological ordering of the Church in terms of its relation to Christ is to deprive all one's learning and insights of the one point of reference which alone can give them meaning and value.

Fourthly, it is essential that we learn from Holy Scripture the outlines which the Church will necessarily have if it is to be conformed to Jesus Christ its Head rather than conformed to the world. It is here that the fine essay by Professor Hanson finally leaves us in the dark. Too sharp a contrast is drawn between the hardened institutionalism of the Church from the second century onwards and the "first rapturous period of freedom and flexibility". Hanson is rightly protesting against the view that a blue-print of church order may be found in doctrinaire fashion in the New Testament, as though

Roman papalism, Anglo-Catholic episcopalianism, or Puritan presbyterianism were the one infallible and universally binding order which all churches must accept if they are truly to be conformed to Christ. In place of this, he rightly argues that Scripture is a sure guide, and that the Spirit and Word are present as ever to the Church.

But with these excellent and yet very imprecise remarks he then breaks off at the very point where something constructive is demanded. Is it right that the "reconciliation with time" (institutions as the proper expression of the Church's mission) should take place irrespective of the New Testament norm? May they take place continuously with changing times even though elements of contradiction to the New Testament be involved? Is there nothing basic to the ministry or church order without which a proper expression of the Church's mission is impossible? Can a church order be constructed which defies the New Testament distinction between the Church and the churches? Is it possible to be an orderly Church if the Gospel also is reconciled with time and led beyond what we find in the apostolic record? Can the principle of transformation rather than conformation be made to justify a dying away of the local church in order that it may be reborn in the national or ecumenical church? These are all questions for which no answer is provided in the present series of essays. They are questions for which no answer can be provided unless serious attention is to be paid to the underlying theological question of the norms of the Church's order, and of the place of Scripture in relation to these norms.

It may be objected that the attempt to discover and apply biblical norms gives rise to continuing disagreement and difficulty, partly because the norms themselves may be assessed differently, and partly because their observance must be adjusted to the changing circumstances of time and place. That there are real problems is not to be denied. On the other hand, the existence of difficulties is no reason why we are not to seek our norms in the Bible. There are problems in the erection and observance of sociological norms. The vague assertion that even apart from the Bible the Church can still be ruled by the Word and Spirit gives rise to the far greater risk of subjectivist confusion. Indeed, one may point out that the whole conception of the Church as a divine and human institution, which is both in the world and yet not of the world, is itself derived only from the Bible, so that a study which begins with a biblical premise and then works it out apart from the biblical pattern is guilty of inherent self-contradiction. Why should we accept the Bible's account of the Church's nature if we are to ignore its guidance as to the form of the Church? Is it not true that in practice we are forced to accept certain very biblical norms if the Church is to remain recognizably the Church, and not to become a sociological monstrosity invalidly claiming to be the Church?

* * * *

This brings us back to the starting-point. A proper study of the Church in the world must be theologically orientated and directed. But this means that, like all else in the Church, it must be under the authority of the written Word of God in Holy Scripture. Where

sociology can help—and there is much help that it can give in detail—it must do so under this basic control. If it does not, we shall again and again be confronted by the sorry spectacle of a Church which in its organization and life, and probably in its thinking too, is more conformed to the world than it is conformed to Christ. But this means that we shall be confronted more by an ecclesiastical institution than by the living Church built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. Like philosophy, or moral science, sociology is only a tool and not a master. As a tool, it can contribute much to the better ordering of the Church's life. As a master, it can only play the rôle of a usurper and tyrant which will deform and devastate the Church and prevent it from either attaining its true life or fulfilling its proper function.

Our suggestion is, then, that even at the risk of delay this Commission undertake a theological and biblical re-evaluation. It might begin by reconstituting itself so that proper representation is given to true biblical, historical, and dogmatic theologians. It should then set to work to lay the theological foundations so that what is subsequently contributed from the sociological and practical angle may be brought under dogmatic scrutiny and established on a solid dogmatic basis. The type of discussion found in most of the essays in Part I should be postponed until this is possible. Perhaps the questions asked will then run rather differently and the answers will be correspondingly reslanted. But what is contributed will undoubtedly be more solid and fruitful. Finally, the case histories can be also assessed from a different angle, and it will be possible to determine whether they offer us genuine contributions to the unity of the Church or merely human devices which, unless they are overruled by the gracious providence of God, may just as well be obstacles as helps to the realization of the Church's nature and mission.
