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

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

Growing into Union

CYRIL BOWLES

ADVOCATES OF THE SCHEME *Anglican-Methodist Unity* (1 *The Ordinal*, 2 *The Scheme*) (SPCK and The Epworth Press, 1968) frequently urged in its favour that no other way could possibly be found in securing the ultimate union of the Church of England and the Methodist Church in England. Voices were raised in answer to this which said that in a situation where opposition to the Scheme was of the strength to be found in both Churches it was impossible to refuse to make further efforts to achieve a wider reconciliation of opinion about the best approach to union. Some even dared to say that another way could be found and among them were the Reverend C. O. Buchanan, now Registrar of St. John's College, Nottingham, the Reverend Doctor E. L. Mascall, Professor of Historical Theology at King's College, London, the Reverend Doctor J. I. Packer, now Principal of Tyndale Hall, Bristol, and the Right Reverend G. D. Leonard, Bishop of Willesden. In May 1969 they joined in issuing a statement to the Convocations in which they said that they had 'a good hope that a scheme could be devised which would include us all with a clear conscience. And, if this is so, could not the "centre" of the Church of England go with us?' This expression of hope was treated with great scorn by supporters of the Scheme, but in a remarkably short period of time these four men have produced a joint work of theological weight, *Growing into Union* (SPCK, 1970). It contains proposals for forming a united Church in England and it contains an important record, in appendices of documents and in other ways, of theological opposition to the Scheme. It also contains discussions of 'fundamental questions of theology, particularly those over which Catholics and Evangelicals have hitherto been prone to disagree' (p. 27). Much agreement is registered and much sympathetic interpretation given of one point of view to another. The significance of this is all the greater because two of the writers are conservative Evangelicals and

the other two represent a conservative view within the Catholic tradition in the Church of England.

To the scorn which greeted the writers' expression of hope has been added abuse of their achievement. They themselves have been attacked as much as their work and their opinions. This abuse is partly created by the deep disappointment which was felt at the rejection of the Scheme by the Convocations in July 1969, but it is only a particularly virulent expression of the bitter disapproval which has been shown to anyone who dared to criticize the Scheme at any stage. This has been a discreditable mark of this whole episode in recent English Church history and it has done no good to the cause of the organic union of the Churches. The authors of this book have not always avoided a similar scorn, which is a pity, but they have been horribly provoked and their disapproval is reserved for the Scheme itself and arguments in favour of it and not for people. It is much to be desired that when general discussion is resumed about the way forward it will be marked by a more Christian spirit and a deeper recognition on the part of all that something of God's truth may have been shown to those who hold different views from their own.

The authors have been criticised specially because they have only produced the results of an inter-Anglican discussion about the Scheme. This criticism ignores the fact that their book is a reply to a particular argument used against Anglican opponents of the Scheme. 'We are aware,' they wrote in May 1969, 'that those who favour the Scheme have urged that, because Evangelicals and Anglo-Catholics are so far divided from each other, the combined weight of their opposition to the Scheme (and particularly to the Service of Reconciliation) can be discounted. This argument suggests that any "concession" to Anglo-Catholics would immediately alienate what Evangelical support there already exists for the Scheme, and vice versa' (p. 163). This was an Anglican debate. The authors were also challenged to produce an alternative scheme. Even if they had been told to consult Methodists in doing so, it is doubtful whether any would have been prepared to join them, particularly when time was so pressing. Besides, the authors reject the policy of restricting a union scheme to two Churches only. Considering the stress under which they had to work, other criticisms based on signs of haste are both superficial and less than generous. The book is a tract for particular times and those who wrote it are to be congratulated on having produced something so astonishingly free from inconsistencies and mistakes.

My main general criticism is that they have done less than justice to the way in which *Towards Reconciliation* (1967) and *Anglican-Methodist Unity* (1968) wrestled with the differences between the Catholic and Evangelical traditions. For my own part I find much of the doctrinal sections of these two reports most impressive. There are places where *Growing into Union* takes the discussion further and

deeper. This again I find impressive, but my approach to the possibility of doctrinal agreement is more that of the Anglican-Methodist Commission than of these four Anglican scholars. Growth into greater doctrinal agreement will come, in my judgement, when a unity of love expresses itself in an organic union where fear and assertiveness and formal barriers have given place to trust and acceptance of people of different outlooks. I cannot see the achievement of union if all doctrinal differences have to be resolved in 'a contemporary confessional statement, given constitutional status in advance' (p. 109).

It is on this book's proposals for the creation of a united Church that attention has chiefly been directed. Their foundation is that any scheme of union must be a one-stage scheme. All other differences from the Anglican-Methodist Scheme, with its two stages of full communion and organic union, go back to this point of departure. Since Archbishop Fisher's famous Cambridge Sermon in 1947 it has been taken for granted that any union scheme in England must begin with a first stage of intercommunion, though Archbishop Fisher himself has declared that the Anglican-Methodist Scheme was not the kind of arrangement he had in mind. *Growing into Union* discusses the difficulties of a two-stage scheme and argues instead for organic union from the beginning. The issues are clearly set out and, whatever else in the practical proposals may be rejected, this foundation question should be examined thoroughly with the fresh stimulus that this brief discussion provides (pp. 126-9).

The one stage proposed is 'the simple expedient of inaugurating a united Church in a piecemeal way territorially, leaving the existing denominations to exist alongside each other in every place where conscience, even untutored conscience, might so decree' (p. 118). Even if this approach be rejected, no other will succeed unless it takes seriously the fact about which the four authors are insistent, namely, 'In England we have to contend with severe and deeply entrenched local division' (p. 132). Union would come about by local churches uniting with one another. 'We would look for a united Church to grow up between the existing denominations by accessions from existing congregations spread slowly over the years. The united Church would start as one or two isolated parish-type areas, grow into an archipelago, and eventually approach a solid shape in region after region, until the participating denominations finally disappeared and a new English Church had replaced them. In every case the transfer would occur only when the local Christians were agreed in desiring it, and, although the parent denomination and the united Church authorities would be involved in negotiating, the local church or churches would be granted full powers to take the decision for themselves' (pp. 132-3).

The basis of union would be a joint confession of faith produced by the parent churches and the mutual acceptance of existing ministries

within an episcopally ordered structure. 'The invariable practice of episcopal ordination' must be maintained in the united Church, but within this context 'existing ministers of the denominations with which the Church of England would be likely to be able to reach agreement could be accepted as presbyters within the total ministry of the new united episcopal Church. . . . We see no other way to do justice to convictions that they are not laymen to be received as candidates for ordination, they are not to be ordained twice, they are not to be given some ceremony superseding ordination, and they are to be taken seriously in their own claims to be ordained in the sight of God' (p. 117). The choice of the first four bishops of the united groups would be with the original denominational negotiators but later the united Church would grow into the position of being able to choose and consecrate its own.

Although the authors have answers to a great many of the difficulties and I welcome the approach to the integration of ministries, which is specially striking as the agreed view of these particular men, I cannot for my own part regard the scheme as a viable one. It involves the dismemberment of the existing denominations and the creation in effect of an additional denomination. It would, to begin with, be one with little consciousness, except a local one, of being a united Church, since its many parts would be so widely scattered. Although discussion reaches the point of absurdity with the picture of the Archbishop of Canterbury and the heads of the other denominations presiding alone over the diminishing rumps of their denominations, it illustrates the problems of piecemeal integration and disintegration. Yet however difficult and possibly absurd this process may appear to be, the writers are correct in pressing on our attention the fact that no satisfactory union of denominations will be achieved without prior local union. Local Methodist uniting has been slow enough. Union between 'church' and 'chapel' will be even slower unless its achievement on a wide scale at the grass roots can precede formal denominational uniting. In one diocese where there was a large vote in favour of the Anglican-Methodist Scheme, it was impossible in one area to hold a service in which the members of the two Churches committed themselves to unity. The reason was that union was not wanted in that part of the diocese. The question before the Churches is how this local union can be achieved. Is it to be by the Anglican-Methodist Scheme or by another based on similar principles? Is it to be by the *Growing into Union* scheme? Is it to be by the increase of reciprocal intercommunion in those areas where the relationships between the denominations are of such an agreed and trusting kind that it would be more wrong not to communicate together than to do so? The last course could lead steadily to general intercommunion which would also be prepared for if the Methodists and others were to take the historic episcopate into their systems and they and the Church of England were

to use an agreed ordinal. Few liturgical texts can have received more widespread immediate agreement than the Anglican-Methodist Ordinal. This is an event of great promise.

Whatever people may think of the proposals for union in this book or of the next steps to be taken towards union, they should not neglect the specifically theological chapters of it. Brief though the dialogue has been between these able representatives of the conservative Evangelical and conservative Catholic traditions, it has been notably fruitful. They have not used theological slogans to reject one another's views, as has so often happened in modern Anglicanism, but they have tried patiently to interpret themselves to one another. The result is that agreements appear about the relationship of Scripture and Tradition, about Grace and Justification by Faith, and about the Church, its Unity and Ministry. Both in the theological section and elsewhere in the book, many doctrinal questions are touched on with freshness, not least because the authors write with live conviction and with concern for the mission of the Church.

It is vital that this book should not be dismissed out of hand, either because of frustration that the Anglican-Methodist Scheme was rejected or because the union scheme proposed is judged to be unworkable. Joint study of it by those in the Catholic and Evangelical traditions of Anglicanism could help make the Church of England an even more genuinely comprehensive body than it is and so assist its contribution to the union of Christendom. If Methodists and other non-Anglicans could join the discussion, Christian union in England could well be furthered. What is necessary is that those who have never faced one another in the trusting dialogue of shared study should commit themselves to the venture. *Growing into Union* would provide them with a great many of the right questions to ask even if it does not in itself provide all the right answers.