

# 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](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php)

# Unity in Church Order

ROGER BECKWITH

Christianity is both a faith to believe and a life to live: it includes both belief and behaviour. Behaviour is of several sorts. There is *moral* behaviour, choosing between right and wrong; there is *worship*, which is also something we do, and therefore a form of behaviour; and there is *church practice*, which includes corporate worship, but includes a lot more as well. Our corporate life, not just as individual Christians but as churches, has to follow certain patterns, if it is not to be completely chaotic. Church practice has therefore to be organized, at least to some degree, and this sort of organization is what we mean by *church order*. And just as there can be unity or disunity in matters of *belief*, according to whether we truly take the Bible as our guide or not; and just as there can be unity or disunity in matters of *moral behaviour*, according to whether we submit to the standards of conduct laid down in the Bible or not; so there can be unity or disunity in matters of *church order*, if different decisions are taken about it by different church bodies, and church life is consequently organized by those bodies in different ways.

Now, any corporate body of people, Christian or non-Christian, secular or religious, needs some degree of organization, and the New Testament does not do much more than recognize this fact of existence and tell *us* to recognize it. The Old Testament had elaborate regulations for the organization of the community, but this is one of the many matters on which the New Testament is much simpler than the Old. We see Jesus commissioning his disciples to go out preaching, baptizing and teaching (Matt. 28); we see Paul and Barnabas appointing elders to teach and pastor all the missionary congregations which they had established (Acts 14); we see Paul recalling the Corinthian congregation to the pattern of the institution of the Lord's Supper, as Christ had appointed it on the night before he died (I Cor. 11); we see him also rebuking the individualism and confusion of their charismatic worship and commanding that all things be done 'unto edifying', that all things be done 'decently and in order' (I Cor. 14); we also see our Lord in Matt. 18 and Paul in a variety of places requiring a loving but firm church discipline to be exercised in the case of those who are erring in their moral behaviour or their doctrinal teaching, and refuse to be corrected. These are examples of church order, or requirements that church order be exercised; but there is usually little detail, and a great deal of discretion is left to the churches to plan and implement church order for themselves. We are allowed to be in no doubt that church order is

good, but at many points we are left to decide for ourselves whether one form of church order is best or another. In the changing circumstances of history, and in different areas of the world, the church was left to exercise its Christian judgment, which is what it proceeded to do. Various big decisions in the area of church order were taken in the first few Christian centuries, on which broad agreement developed, but in minor matters there were countless local variations.

At the time of the Reformation in the sixteenth century, the primary concern of the Reformers was with doctrine and morals, because on these vital matters the church had clearly gone astray from the Bible; but where worship or church order reflected doctrinal or moral errors, or hindered the reform of such errors, it too received attention. Worship, in particular, was very thoroughly revised. On many matters of church order, however, which seemed to have been wisely arranged and on which Scripture said nothing to the contrary, things were kept much as they were, especially in the Lutheran countries of Germany and Scandinavia, and also in England. There were some Reformers who adopted a different policy, notably the Anabaptists (of whom the modern Baptists are the much more sober heirs), who considered that they should sweep everything away and begin again with a clean slate. This they attempted to do, and made some awful mistakes in the process. In Switzerland, Zwingli also tended to want to begin again from scratch, notably in worship, with the Bible as his only guide; and the second generation of Calvinists (more than Calvin himself) leaned in this direction, and found disciples in the English Puritans. In trying to begin again from Scripture, they faced the difficulty that Scripture says nothing on many matters of church order, and they therefore developed the principle that the silence of Scripture is equivalent to prohibition, and that any example we find in Scripture is equivalent to a command. Biblical as this may sound, it was really arbitrary, and they found it impossible to carry it out with consistency. Many decisions had to be taken in face of the silence of Scripture, which (on their principle) the silence of Scripture really forbade them to take.<sup>1</sup> According to Luther and Cranmer, on the other hand, commands and prohibitions are the principal thing. What the Bible commands (explicitly or implicitly) we must do, and what it forbids we must not do. Its examples are to be treated as edifying, but not necessarily as models for direct imitation, and its silences leave us with the responsibility of exercising our Christian reason, and making those decisions which seem likeliest to promote the Gospel in our own circumstances.

This would sometimes mean maintaining the *status quo*, and if Calvin thought that the Anglicans were too attached to their own local customs, it may be because, in the interests of church unity and avoiding offending the conscience of the weaker brother, they were

reluctant to make *unnecessary* changes in existing practice.<sup>2</sup> The same, however, is true of the Lutherans.

The reason for the difference in the New Testament treatment of church order, over against moral behaviour and belief, is probably not far to seek. Belief is a matter of true or false, and moral behaviour is a matter of right or wrong, so a great deal was at stake. It was important that God should reveal what is true and right, and that man should accept it without alteration or variation. Organization, however, was something which could be carried out in many different ways, and, provided certain important institutions were maintained, and certain broad principles were borne in mind, one way might be as good as another. Thus, abstractly considered, Presbyterianism may be as good a system of church government as Episcopacy, and so may Congregationalism; one system is strong at points where another is weak, and *vice versa*. At the same time, the weaknesses of Episcopacy or any other system are capable of being minimized by reform, if due account is taken of the criticisms to which experience gives rise. All that moderate Anglicans would claim for Episcopacy is that, in principle, it can be shown to be as satisfactory as any rival system of church government, and that, since it has stood the test of time for so long, this suggests that it may be *more* satisfactory than rival systems. They would not assert that it has direct sanction from the New Testament, only that it has a recognizable relationship with the practice of New Testament times, out of which it developed at a very early period. The reasons for this development may have been disciplinary, like the reasons evidently responsible for various other developments of sub-apostolic times which have survived to this day (and not only among episcopalians), such as the delay between conversion and baptism, the separation of the holy communion from the agape, the confining of the celebration of communion to the presbyterate, and the evolution of creeds. None of these developments has direct sanction from the New Testament, so each is in principle alterable; but none of them can be plausibly accused of being contrary to the New Testament (however much some of them may have been abused), and if they were brought about in the interests of discipline, they were at least prompted by an important New Testament *concern*. Since the church is in so much need of discipline today (not that it always recognizes the fact), the challenge of the present hour is not to abandon the sub-apostolic developments but to apply them to their original purpose. To abandon them, after such a length of time and with no pressing necessity, would be such an upheaval and so controversial that it would be bound to offend many consciences and do further damage to Christian unity.

Episcopacy is only one of the marks of Anglicanism. Its marks, in all, may be said to be eight. It is (1) Scriptural; (2) Reformed; (3) Confessional, that is using confessions of faith, such as the three

creeds and the Thirty-nine Articles; (4) Liturgical, that is using set forms of prayer, though not excluding freer forms on occasion; (5) Episcopal, that is governed by bishops, though not without consultation; (6) Parochial, that is dividing up the country geographically, to provide pastoral care and evangelism everywhere, not just where a like-minded group already exists, to be gathered together; (7) Established, that is having a positive relationship with the state, involving state-recognition; and (8) Paedo-baptist, that is baptizing the infant children of Christian families, and not just adults. All of these marks except the first three may be said to be matters of church order, and in an external sense the third is a matter of church order likewise. On all eight marks Anglicans are in agreement with Lutherans, but only on the first two are they in agreement with all Protestants. It is on the matters of church order that the differences are to be found, therefore. On the fifth mark, Anglicans differ from Presbyterians, as well as from Congregationalists and Baptists. On four marks (the third, fourth, sixth and seventh), Anglicans differ from Congregationalists and Baptists, though not from Presbyterians. On the eighth mark, Anglicans differ from Baptists only, while agreeing with all other Protestants.

If there were to be a realignment of Protestantism (and even if there were not!), concessions which Anglicans might well consider making, to help meet the scruples of other Protestants, are these:

- (a) Anglican Episcopacy might be made more fully consultative.
- (b) The practice of the Church of England up to 1662 might be reinstated, of not requiring ordained ministers of other Protestant churches to receive episcopal ordination when joining the Church of England.<sup>3</sup>
- (c) The expanded term 'presbyter' might be substituted in Anglican usage for the ambiguous contraction 'priest'.<sup>4</sup>
- (d) The adult baptism of children of Christian parents might be permitted, where parents had conscientious scruples, provided that re-baptism were excluded.

These concessions would only go a limited way, and would do nothing to meet problems about the use of confessions of faith and liturgical worship, or about state-establishment. However, any problem would be open to discussion, and even on the last issue the problems of Free Churchmen often turn out to be more imaginary than real!

**ROGER BECKWITH** is Warden of Latimer House, Oxford.

## NOTES

- 1 These decisions were said to concern only 'incidentals', but the 'incidentals' were not perceptibly different from the matters on which a scriptural command or example was said to be required. The first two papers in the volume

*Spiritual Worship*, which is the report of the 1985 Westminster Conference, give a clear exposition of the 'regulative principle' of the Puritans, as applied to worship, and of its historical emergence, but express considerable reserve about its validity. In Free Church writers with strong Puritan sympathies, this is an interesting attitude to find!

- 2 Calvin's letter to Dr. Richard Cox and his associates, 12 June 1555, where he expresses these sentiments, is primarily concerned with the use of the English Prayer Book by the exiles at Frankfurt, including some old ceremonies which it retained (or which Calvin thought it did). The original Latin text of the letter is in vol.9 of Calvin's *Opera* (Amsterdam, 1667), and there is an English translation in G.C. Gorham's *Reformation Gleanings* (London, Bell & Daldy, 1857), pp.345-9. The Anglican principle which gave rise to the letter is laid down in Article 34 and in Cranmer's statement 'Of Ceremonies' in the Book of Common Prayer.
- 3 See Norman Sykes, *Old Priest and New Presbyterian* (Cambridge, The University Press, 1956), ch.4. The practice could be extended from foreign Protestants to English Free Churchmen.
- 4 See R.T. Beckwith, *Priesthood and Sacraments* (Abingdon, Marcham Manor Press, 1964), ch.2.

#### Editor's Note

Since the publication of his paper in our last issue 'Faith Hope and Love Abide' we have received a letter from Richard Morgan referring to an essay by Moltmann entitled 'Creation as an Open System' in his *Future of Creation*, published in 1979. In that later work Moltmann does break through to a view of the eternity of hope, and in fairness to him the author has requested that the following minor corrections should be made to the published text:

Page 132 *Insert* the words 'for the most part' after the word 'Yet' (line 17).

Page 135 *Delete* the words 'Moltmann, then, does not give grounds for explaining the eternity of hope' (lines 31 and 32). *Insert* a footnote reference (12) in its place. *Delete* the words 'Against this' (line 33).

Page 136 *Change* footnote reference no.12 to 13 (line 10).

Page 137 *Delete* second paragraph (lines 15-20).

Page 139 *Insert* Note 12:

See, however, Moltmann's 'Creation of an Open System' in his *Future of Creation*, first published in 1979, in which he breaks through these hindrances to affirm a doctrine of eternal hope, stating 'there will be time and history, future and possibility in the Kingdom of glory as well . . . in unimpeded measure and in a way that is no longer ambivalent'. There he can come to speak of God's being as 'the transcendent making possible of all possible realities'. He contrasts this definition with 'the highest reality for all realised potentialities' showing a continued allergy to a 'vertical model' of transcendence, which, however, seems to be a clear and biblical model on which this insight can be based. Vertical and horizontal transcendence are both needed in our understanding of God.

*Change* '12' to '13' (line 3).