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

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_evangelical\\_quarterly.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php)

## THE CHURCH AND THE CHURCHES

IN most recent discussions with a view towards the reunion of the Church there are discernible in the main two means of approach. The first is that of a naïve faith in the unity which is in Christ. The second is that of exclusive and minute historical investigation. The first is like a telescope which foreshortens the view, and neglects the immediate situation. The second is like a microscope which equally neglects the true context of the discussion. With the first the view is falsified, because idealised, and the Kingdom of God appears as an immediate possibility—that is, a possibility to be realised by the strenuous efforts of men. But to cling ever so passionately to the unity which is in Christ is insufficient to deal with the stubborn facts of our present disunity. It is equally insufficient to set the discussion only within the context of the perils of our time, to speak simply of the need for the Churches to draw closer together and present a common front against the false, post-Christian ideologies, and against the disintegration, through the manifold onslaught of war, of congregational life and organised Christian witness. However much such peril and such threat of disintegration may shame and stir us, they cannot of themselves provide the real incentive for union. The fact that organised Christianity, along with all other organised forms in society, is in flux and peril to-day does not provide a *Christian* ground for moving towards unity of action, far less inter-communion or union. Christian action never depends so directly and naïvely on ideal views of what is possible because the situation demands it. The Christian view of what is possible depends not on the ideal demands of the human situation, but on the realistic demands in the immediate situation of the crucified God-Man.

Re-union, then, it must be emphasised, is to be attained not through making our differences a matter of less importance than the sheer demand of physical survival as organised Churches; but rather by making our differences more decisive, and, in charity, seeking thereafter to find the real common ground from which common action may be taken. "We are Protestants from zeal, and not from indifference", said Edmund Burke.

It is no less necessary to-day that we should perceive our real position before venturing to give it away, under the delusion that a common peril demands an immediate co-operation. Those who speak glibly of every Church standing for "the same thing", betray a personal insensitivity to history, and a zeal for the pragmatic solution to our difficulties, for "what works" rather than for what is God's will for this generation, that augur ill for their real hold on Christian faith in the impending disintegration of modern society.

These two points of view, then (which fall within what we term the "telescope" view of the Church), both that which proceeds from a passionate desire for that unity which is in Christ, and that which proceeds from a vivid awareness of the post-Christian forces which are motivating society, are alike inadequate in themselves to promote reunion, since they do not proceed from a proper regard for the essential ground of the Church.

Likewise the second means, the microscopical investigation of historical claims, falsifies the view. This at once involves the discussing parties in matters of historical enquiry, criticism of sources and texts, and so on. It cannot be too strongly emphasised that this means of enquiry leads by itself to no unshakable conclusion. This is particularly important for the standpoint of Reformed theology. In fact, to place exclusive reliance on the external historical argument and investigation means, as we hope to show, the abandonment of the whole Reformed position. But in any case, *a priori* a devotion of the discussion to an exclusive historical enquiry can never lead to anything but approximate conclusions. Soren Kierkegaard, in his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, has made devastatingly clear how any narrow traditional appeal to history can never yield certainty, but always only probabilities which in themselves have no authority, but may in their turn be upset by further enquiry. But you cannot live, or die, in the strength of a probability. Nor can you undertake any Christian action on the basis of a conclusion which is uncertain in such a way. Christian action, in fact, is set at once in a profounder and a more secure context than that of historical investigation alone, e.g. of the historical source of the monarchic episcopate. Christian action is set in the context of the Word of God. Hence Reformed theologians must maintain, from their standpoint, an equal intransigence

with that, for instance, of the Anglicans. It betrays a complete misunderstanding of Reformed teaching to suppose that we may enter, with hope of reaching agreement, on discussion with, say, Anglo-Catholics about the validity of orders and the claims of the historical episcopate to unbroken succession from apostolic times. For the essence of the Protestant position, as contained in Reformed theology, depends on a different relation to the historical setting from that of the Roman or the Anglo-Catholic position. It depends on the relation to the living Word of God.

Fruitful discussion is possible with the Anglo-Catholics, and discussion in charitable understanding of difference is possible with the Roman Catholics, so long as Reformed theologians maintain their only possible standpoint: a standpoint not of ideal hopes or of historical controversy, but one of doctrine and theology. For in the last resort the issue is one of theology. This the Anglo-Catholics recognise and freely acknowledge. The fact that the Reformed and the Anglo-Catholic standpoints show real signs of identity, or at least similarity, of interest, is one of the most hopeful signs of inter-Church relations. Hitherto the undoubted strength of the Anglo-Catholic position has lain in its strong and sound liturgical movement, which has in fact provided the most vital element to the Church of England for the last several generations. From this liturgical interest the Anglo-Catholics have lately been moving towards a re-thinking of their doctrinal position. Likewise the Reformed Churches, from their more purely theological tradition and interest, have been moving towards a better understanding of the doctrine and meaning of the Church. It is scarcely too much to hope that the proper exposition of theological standpoints may lead, however slowly, yet more surely than any other way, to that reunion which is the desire of Christ.

The real issue, then, is one of theology. Theology, which is the self-consciousness of the Church,<sup>1</sup> its thought about what constitutes it as the Church, is the real subject of concern. The doctrine of the Church, therefore, is the luminous point towards which every side must turn. All other issues and doctrines, the validity of orders, the place of Scripture and

<sup>1</sup> "Self-consciousness," but not in the Schleiermacherian sense of an exploration of subjective experience: but self-consciousness as the result of the addressing, and scrutiny, of the Church by the living Word.

of the Sacraments, and the significance of the historical monarchic episcopate, fall into place round this point.

What, then, is the Church? Is the Church the Body of Christ? Is the voice of the Church the voice of God? Is the Church the custodian and witness of the Word of God? Is the Church to be identified with Christ speaking to the age, and to each age? And if this latter possibility is the truth, where then may the Church find room for criticism of its own message? Are we then bound to rely on a "coherence" view, in which the interlocking elements of the apostolic testimony and of the traditions and formularies of the Church provide the means by which the voice of God may be heard?

This latter "coherence" view is, in its logical sharpness, the view of Rome. To the Roman Catholic the Holy See is in the last resort the authoritative voice of God speaking on matters of faith, and from its pronouncements no appeal to any other source is permissible. No other appeal, in fact, is possible. For in the Holy See, it is maintained, rest all possible grounds of understanding, in faith, the Will of God for His Church: Scripture, tradition, the whole self-authenticating voice of the Church, unite in one massive and insurmountable body of truth which is the very being of Christ on earth. The Church is the extension of the Incarnation. The voice of the Church is the voice of God.

Now it must certainly be agreed by all Christians that in some sense Christ does speak through those who are consecrated to His service as believing members of the institutional Church. The company of practising believers, where the Word of God is truly preached and the Sacraments duly dispensed, is the place where Christ is heard. *Ubi Christus ibi ecclesia* is a slogan found among every society of Christians. No Church which is at all conscious of its calling to preach Christ can set aside this possibility that Christ may speak directly through the society of believers. In repentance and faith and new life the Church must continually press toward the mark, seeking through its own transformation to be conformed to the will of God in Christ.

But the Church can never be *simpliciter* identified with Christ Himself speaking. Here the issue between Reformed and Roman theology becomes sharp and clear. To Reformed theology the Church is the voice of Christ only in *faith*. But

faith is not a condition of being, but a response to grace, that is, to God's whole action in Christ towards men. Always, therefore, the Church speaks of Christ, proclaims Christ, subject to correction—from Christ Himself. Always the relation to Christ is dialectical. Christianity is not simple. Quite literally it is not simple, but twofold. The Church is in its very being set over against Christ the Word of God. This is its glory, that it should continually seek correction from the judgment of Christ. This is its strength, that it should continually be aware, in humility, of its weakness.

It would be a step of cardinal importance if all the Churches were to be existentially aware of this sense in which we are all humiliated by Christ the Word. At once "common followers of Christ and common traitors to Him", we may find no security or finality except in Him. Security and finality are to be found in no doctrine at all, not even in the doctrine of the Church; but always and only in response to Christ. But this finality is not the finality of infallibility, nor this security the security of fixed formulas or propositions of belief; but they are the finality and security of faith in Christ. That is to say, *in faith* we are in Christ; in faith we are open to His grace through the operation of the Holy Ghost. But at the same time we are in danger, for we are also, and always, open to His judgment. The Church stands always under the judgment of Christ: only in this way is the Church truly the Church. Only in this way is the Church able to discern its difference from the world. And only by discerning this difference is it able to continue in faith.

The Church, then, lives as the Church only in constant tension with Christ. But where then may this Christ be known? Where may this necessary tension of responsibility and grace, judgment and repentance, faith and growth in grace, be perceived for the valid and necessary and quite objective and inescapable thing which we believe it to be? How may we avoid falling into the lamentable error of mere separatism and subjectivism, which leads men to say that *they* are the Church and that all who believe in a different way are wrong? That this is a very real danger in our life the history of the Church in our own land of Scotland has made only too painfully clear.

There is only one way in which the fellowship of believers may be aware of its true condition, and that is by reference to

the apostolic testimony. Mr. Daniel T. Jenkins, in his most stimulating essay, *The Nature of Catholicity*,<sup>1</sup> has made abundantly clear the precise way in which the Reformed Churches insist on their apostolic authority. The succession which we inherit and maintain is one "of doctrine not of persons". The reference is not to any formulations of the traditions of the Church (such as to the theory of the "mechanical" view of the external succession of apostolic authority), but to the apostolic witness given us in Scripture. This witness is not a witness *about* the apostles, about their faith or their religious genius or their personal biography or their spiritual gifts and powers; but it is a witness about Christ: it points away from the witnesses themselves to Christ. Of course the Scriptures are embedded in the history of their times, in respect of their composition and structure; and of course they are patient of all manner of historical and literary criticism: but these are secondary matters. The distinctive and indeed the unique quality of the Scriptures is that they bear witness, they point—to the Word of God. They are not themselves revelation, nor in any simple and external way the Word of God. They may *become* revelation and the Word of God, but only when the Holy Ghost is present to make them so for the believing reader. The Source of all activity and the Author of all action for the Christian believer is the Blessed Trinity. Therefore the source of all action and activity for the Church is likewise the Blessed Trinity. Without the Lord, the hidden God who is revealed in Christ still remains hidden, Scripture remains a dead letter and the Church a mere organisation within the world. But with the Lord, Scripture comes alive and the Church is in being—that is, is in relation with the living Word. "Christ is Lord" remains to-day, as it has been from early times, in the baptismal word, the heart and essence of all faith and of all possible life of the Church.

From this constant reference direct through the apostolic testimony to Christ, two consequences clearly flow.

(1) The Church is in constant need of reformation. The "Reformation" in the particular historical sense is not a historical accident, but a specially powerful movement of faith with special, and tragic, historical consequences, for the Western

<sup>1</sup> Published by Faber, 1942; the present writer owes grateful acknowledgment to Mr. Jenkins's book for much more than this single point.

Church. This movement of faith goes on all the time in the living Church. Nothing is sadder to contemplate than the fixity and crass objectification which followed in every Church in the generations succeeding the Reformation. The result has been, almost till our own day, a dissipation of the Church's concern for itself in humble faith, an extravagant concern for its powers in quite unchristian ways (for instance in the almost exclusively disciplinary interests of the Church of Scotland, and, bound closely up with those interests, its insidious adaptation to the world in the "liberal" heresy), and the over-emphasis of one aspect to the detriment of others (as, again in Scotland, in the loss of the liturgical concern of the first Reformers).

(2) But in the tragedy of the Church's failure to maintain its relation to Christ as Lord, and in particular the failure of the Reformed Churches (for this is their only reason for existing in separation from the Roman Church, that they should maintain the pure but dialectical witness to Christ the Word over against all "coherence" views of the Church<sup>1</sup>), there is also a great hope. It is the hope of humility. The Reformed Churches must recognise, and recognise gladly, that they are *defective* witnesses to Christ. They must be ready to perceive in humility that other Churches, and especially (for the Church of Scotland) that the Church of England has in other respects maintained a witness of order which must be welcomed in the end as no hindrance, but rather an aid, to re-union. Reference has already been made to the noble liturgical tradition of the Church of England. The episcopate, too, will possibly in the end have to be recognised as part of a full Church order. But such recognition must always be from within the proper theological dependence on the judgment of Christ presented in the witness of the apostles: only thus are the possibilities of rapprochement genuinely Christian and not merely pragmatic or worldly.

In any case, from what, in personal discussion and in examination of accessible literature, may be perceived by the non-Anglican of the Anglican concern to-day, and in particular of what is increasingly clearly the truly vital section of the Anglican Church, namely, the Anglo-Catholic, it would seem that the Church of England may well be entering on a crisis

<sup>1</sup> The reason for existing in separation goes deeper, of course, than this single brief statement might imply. There is a whole world of difference in theological outlook, in particular with regard to the *analogia entis* and the *analogia fidei*. Przywara recognises this clearly.



—the only real Christian crisis—the coming under the judgment of the living Word. If there is the due sense of the present defectiveness of all the Churches, it may be that reformed churchmen as well as Anglo-Catholics will be able to hear the Word again in humility, and faith, and hope, and charity, and with Him find a proper unanimous course of action, “agreeable to the Word of God”—indeed, more than “agreeable”, but the direct and unimpeachable leading of the Holy Ghost for the Church in our day.

In conclusion, it would seem that the real line of cleavage is not between Anglicans and Presbyterians, or between Protestants and Anglo-Catholics, or even between Romans and non-Romans, but between those who are aware of the present disintegration of Western society, of the present judgment of God, and of the present call of the Holy Ghost, and those who cling with wistful and invincible ignorance to the *status quo ante*. But there is no going back. It is to be hoped that with a proper theological concern the Churches may go forward in faith to where the Spirit calls them into the unity of the one Lord.

*Selkirk.*

RONALD GREGOR SMITH.