



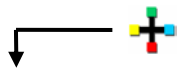
## Anglicans and Christian Reunion

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This article seeks to register two convictions, to ask a question, and to address a plea to those who are responsible for guiding the discussions of Anglicans with other Christians.

I. The first conviction is that it is the will of God that all Christian people should be united in one visible and recognizable communion embracing doctrine, sacraments, ministry, and congregational fellowship.

Probably there is no Christian who denies that in some sense all Christians should be one. The issue is not whether we should be one, but what kind of unity God wills for us. It appears to be part of the climate of our time that everything tends to coagulate into huge organizations. There is no particular Christian interest in advocating that the Church should do the same. The Church cannot adapt itself to the requirements of the twentieth century without forming organs of consultation and common action on the local and national levels as well as on a world scale. This is simply a necessity imposed upon the Church by the facts of our situation. The danger is that this necessary development should beguile Christians into thinking that they are being led by the Holy Spirit, into the unity for which Christ prayed, when in fact they are merely being led by the spirit of the times into a kind of unity which everybody goes in for nowadays from plumbers to palaeontologists.

This is not an imaginary danger. There are good Christians who think that in our national and world councils of Churches we have now *got* Christian unity. From this point of view the intransigence of Anglicans about intercommunion is regarded as only a regrettable survival from less enlightened days. But one does not have to be an Anglican to see that the unity of these inter-church organizations (for which I thank God with all my heart) is not the unity which we refer to when we speak of one Holy Catholic Church. The World Council of Churches has repeatedly and explicitly reminded its member churches of this. Co-operation in common projects of service to those in need, co-operation in schemes of training, common study of the great issues of faith and duty, even the deep experiences of fellowship which many of us owe to our participation in ecumenical meetings—all of these fall short of that total commitment to one another in a shared

sacramental and congregational life which is of the essence of the Church. I am quite sure that the Holy Spirit is at work in these movements for inter-church fellowship, and that the things listed above are among the fruits of his working. But the fact remains that these things fall short of the fulness of churchliness, and that if they begin to occupy the central place in men's thinking about what it means to be in Christ, the result must be a drastic distortion of the Church's life and witness.

I believe that faithfulness to the revealed will of God requires of us that we should be content with nothing less than this: that all who accept Christ as Lord and Saviour should be recognizably one

family *in each place*, bound together visibly by the one baptism, by the reading, preaching, and obedient hearing of the word of God, by common participation in the Lord's Supper, by a ministry of word and sacrament recognizable by all Christians as the one apostolic ministry, and by a common congregational life in which there is freedom for the ministry of the entire membership in accordance with the gifts given by the Spirit to each. In that sentence I have underlined the words "in each place". The Church will not make good its claim to have the secret of atonement for all men with God and with one another, unless the truth of that claim is demonstrated in the context of ordinary day-to-day neighbourly relations. It is true that in this technological age the question "Who is my neighbour?" cannot be answered in terms of mere geographical propinquity. But quite certainly it cannot be answered in terms which ignore the man in the same street and the same village. The most fundamental issues that are involved in our unity in Christ are not encountered and overcome until we deal with them at the level of ordinary daily life and leisure. It is at the level of ordinary congregational life that church union becomes real, and at the same time costly. It cannot be too strongly insisted that a church union which is not costly, which does not involve the whole of our churchmanship in a searching encounter with the living God, is not worth having. A unity which leaves our Churches as they are and merely ties them together by some administrative device, fails to meet the real sickness of which our disunity is the symptom.

II. The second conviction is that the Anglican communion has a unique part to play in the task of reunion. It is often said that Anglicans are the people who provide most of the drive towards re union, and most of the obstacles in its way. I can certainly testify that it was chiefly from Anglicans that I learned that the disunity of Christendom is a terrible sin. But, like other free churchmen, I was constantly affronted by the fact that my Anglican friends professed to regard me as a fellow-Christian, but excluded me from the Lord's Supper. I only slowly came to feel the force of their argument that to sever participation in the Lord's Supper from commitment to an indissoluble partnership in the life of the Church was a kind of promiscuity which must be rejected in the interests of true churchmanship. I came to see that both the Anglican concern about unity and the Anglican intransigence about inter-communion sprang from the same root in a deep concern about the nature of both Church and sacrament. I also came to see that the same truth was illustrated from the opposite side by the fact that free churchmen, who practised unrestricted inter-communion, showed on the whole so little concern about organic unity.

Let me add in parenthesis that I did not come, and have never come, to believe that the Anglican position on inter-communion was right, only that I came to see the force of the conviction on which it was based. If there is any "right" way for a divided Church to behave, I think it must include both mutual acceptance at the Lord's table, and a deep determination that this mutual acceptance shall be

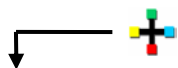
carried over into the whole range of church life. We cannot be content to let go either of these.

Nevertheless, I do not think it can be denied that Anglicanism, with its deep sense of the Church as something given, something constituted by God and not by our faith or our participation, and with its episcopal ministry carried over from the ancient Church, has a unique responsibility in the task of Christian reunion. Surely there is no other Church participating in the ecumenical movement which could play the determinative role that the Anglican Church could play if it was wholeheartedly ready to lose its own separate existence for the sake of the wider unity of a Church catholic and reformed.

III. But this brings me to my question – What is, in fact, the Anglican policy in regard to Christian reunion? Is that policy aimed at organic reunion on the basis of something like the Lambeth Quadrilateral, or at something quite different? I hope I may be forgiven for saying that to an outside observer it seems that the present policy of the Church of England entails an abandonment of the great truth in this realm to which Anglicanism has borne witness, namely the indissoluble relation between sacramental fellowship and the total life of the Church. Unless I am completely misunderstanding the situation, the final result of the present discussions between Anglicans and Presbyterians and Methodists will be a series of episcopally ordered bodies practising promiscuous inter-communion with one another, but without any actual organic union. I submit that this will mean that we have lost what we have without gaining what we seek. Let me be specific.

(1) It is said that inter-communion will be a step on the way to full unity. The experience of the English Free Churches does not encourage one to believe that that is true. If there is a real passion for unity, and a willingness to pay the cost of it, inter-communion is the proper relationship of the Churches as they move forward to the fulfilment of their unity. But experience surely shows that intercommunion apart from any such passion merely slackens the tension of desire, and weakens the sense of the seriousness of what is involved in sharing together in the Lord's Supper. If, in one street, we have episcopal church No. 1 (Anglican), episcopal church No. 2 (Presbyterian), and episcopal church No. 3 (Methodist), each under a different bishop, related to a quite separate church organization, it is hard to see that the scandal of division has in any way been lessened in that street, even though the members are free to drop in at each other's communions. I apologize for that horrible phrase, but is the sense of horror quite out of place?

(2) I find it quite impossible to think that simply taking in episcopacy as a system of church government will produce the result that Anglicans hope for. It seems to me more likely that it will produce a merely administrative episcopacy. I have always remembered a moment in an ecumenical discussion when an Anglican had been commending episcopacy and trying to explain to the rest all that it meant to him. When he had spoken, a Presbyterian replied, "We would gladly have episcopacy if you come with it." Surely the wholeness for



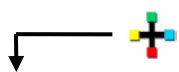
which we pray cannot come otherwise than by our becoming a whole people. The healing which we need cannot be accomplished by merely piecing together our broken structures. It must be the whole body of the faithful that grows together into one. Episcopacy and presbytery and congregation will find their true unity when episcopalians and presbyterians and congregationalists accept one another and agree to share a common life, not before.

(3) Thirdly-and this is the most fundamental point of all-I cannot believe that this line of approach to the problem of reunion really faces the question of what our disunity means. It is, if one may venture to say so, an administrative rather than a churchly and pastoral approach to the problem. Our disunity is sin. We are divided because we have fallen away from Christ-all of us. Some of us have surely fallen farther than others. But on the penitents' bench comparisons are out of place. At the point of penitence we must accept and forgive one another as Christ has accepted and forgiven us. To lay down pre-conditions for reception is to violate the whole relationship of

grace which God has established with us. We are rightly afraid of any easy-going relativism which pretends that one kind of churchmanship is as good as another. But to try to escape that by insisting on certain reforms in the other church before we can accept them as brothers is to fall into something as deadly as the relativism we are trying to avoid. To accept one another *at the point of repentance* is an action of a quite different quality from the relativism which we rightly condemn. It means that we acknowledge together our departure from the line of God's will for the Church, that we place ourselves afresh under his judgment mediated to us both by our mutual criticism of one another and by the events of the time in which we live, and that together we seek to learn what he wants us to be. Such acceptance is as far as anything could be from easy-going relativism. It involves the churches in searching self-examination and in far-reaching reformation. But it places things in their proper order -the order of grace-where conformity to God's will is the fruit of his acceptance and not the precondition. To reverse that order means to fall from grace. We know that this is true in the life of the individual. We find it hard to accept it for our churches.

IV. My plea, then, is that Anglicans should acknowledge the fact that this frank recognition of other churches, without hedging or reservation, is the only possible basis upon which any real work for reunion can be built. This does not mean saying that presbyterial ordination is as good as episcopal or that any liturgy is as good as any other. It is compatible with the most definite beliefs about what God does and does not will for his Church in the matter of life, order and worship. Nor does it mean the adoption of a program of promiscuous inter-communion unrelated to any serious program of reunion. But it does mean that, at the point of reunion, we accept one another simply and completely without hedging or reservation, as fellow-members and fellow-ministers in Christ by his pure grace.

I wonder whether Anglicans generally realize how much their fellow-Christians in other communions have been perplexed by what



has often seemed to be the lack of candour in Anglican statements on this subject. Statements have been made which seemed to the simple reader to mean outright recognition and acceptance, but which were subsequently found to mean something much less. The most shocking example known to me is recorded in the story of the Australian proposals for inter-communion. It was proposed to include in the formula regarding mutual commissioning of ministers the phrase, "It is understood that the acceptance of a wider ministerial commission does not in any sense imply re-ordination". To an ordinary Free Churchman this would naturally be taken as an assurance that the previous ordination was not being denied by the proposed rite. Subsequent discussion arising out of an accident in drafting revealed the fact that the purpose of the phrase was precisely to safeguard the opposite intention, namely that what is conferred in the proposed rite is not re-ordination but ordination, because there was no previous ordination at all. (The record is in *The Australian Proposals for Inter-communion, 1948, PP. 47 50*)

I hope I shall be pardoned for saying that things like this make non-episcopal negotiators very wary in dealing with Anglicans. The event which finally made union possible in South India was the publication of a statement by the Eve Anglican bishops stating that from the date of union onwards they would be entirely willing and happy to receive communion equally from any presbyter of C.S.I. whether ordained episcopally or otherwise. Only such a frank and unambiguous acceptance of one another *at the point of reunion* can provide a basis for unity. I have underlined the words "at the point of reunion". I am not asking Anglicans to take an action which suggests that the things they have stood for are of merely relative importance. I am asking that we should all take as the basis of our approach to church unity the elementary evangelical truth that conformity to the will of God is the fruit of grace and not the pre-condition of it. This means that, however severely we may have to criticize one another for our failure to conform to the whole will of God for his Church, we do not demand of each other certain measures of reform

as the pre-condition of acceptance. It means that when we turn together to God in an act of repentance, which includes a willingness to surrender our separate existences in order to put ourselves afresh under the judgment and mercy of *God, at that point* we accept one another as we are. That is surely the only method of Christian reunion which is proper to the order of grace.

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