

THE ONE CHURCH AND REUNION MOVEMENTS

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The desire that the will of Christ, manifested in His prayer "that they all may be one," be speedily accomplished has been repeated so often by the Vicars of Christ, that all efforts sincerely directed towards its fulfilment are worthy of study. The present strivings of those separated from the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church are briefly summarized in this comment.

Currently the desire for unity is concretised in the creation of a World Council of Churches. This venture, a new departure in the ecumenical movement, was recommended by the Edinburgh and Oxford Conferences of 1938. Its establishment is an attempt to show the fundamental oneness of the member churches in the ecumenical movement. While the Council manifests the unity already achieved, it admits that it is far from the goal sought. The constitution of the World Council was drafted at Utrecht. The Council consists of a general assembly of 450 which is to meet every five years, a central committee which meets annually, and commissions for study in the fields where common action is not yet possible.¹

The new factors which this Council introduces in the movement are: (1) It is a movement of the churches. Formerly, churches chose representatives and sent them to conferences. Now they are in an organization directly, with continuous relations and direct responsibility for the ecumenical task. The admission is made that there has been ignorance of what the Church is, and an effort is being made to learn anew the nature and functions of the Church. The Church is now recognized as the form of life which God ordained for His children. And the Church sought is a concrete, organized Church, not an abstraction. (2) The Council acknowledges the interdependence of unity in faith and order and cooperation in life and work. For if Christians act as one body, without being one body, and do not ask why they are not one body, confusion is inevitable. A common conception of truth must be the foundation for common activity.²

It is interesting to note how the elements in the philosophic definition of a society are implicit in the explanation of the new factors which the

¹See *Christendom*, IV (Winter 1939), 1, 104.

²*Christendom* IV (Winter 1939), 1, 21-31.

Council introduces into the ecumenical movement. Will they reach the goal of the perfect society which Christ instituted? The hope that they will is offset by difficulties in the very framework of the Council. It has no constitutional power over the churches. It is consultative, not legislative. It is in the anomalous position of having duties but no corresponding rights. It has no authority. The reason for the lack of authority is excellent. Authority presupposes a measure of real unity in faith, which does not exist. Realizing its inadequacy in terms of the goal sought, organic unity, the Council proposes: (1) Study, that it may know the faith of the member churches; (2) Ecumenical conversation or spiritual traffic between the churches; (3) To manifest the unity which does exist; (4) To be an instrument of mutual aid. The encouraging feature of this program is the realization of its own shortcomings which the Council confesses. There can be hope that prayer and study will bring light and truth.

The creation of the World Council of Churches is symptomatic of the yearnings of the true ecumenicals. Statements, which fifty years ago would have brought tests of orthodoxy, are today fearlessly made, bravely published, and received with cheers. The sense of the unique character and supreme importance of the Church, as visible, Catholic and Ecumenical, is said to be a recovery of the deep conviction of the reformers. Admittedly, nineteenth and twentieth century Protestantism introduced a negative concept of the Church. The relation of Church and State need not be a problem, for, "The Church has no ambition to usurp the functions of the State, nor any thought of permitting herself to be absorbed and annihilated in some future approved social system."³ Truly a papal pronouncement, but not made by a Pope. The words of the Oxford Conference Report speak of the Church as ". . . the body of Christ, the universal, supranational fellowship which He called into being by His Word and Spirit, or in the words of the Apostle's Creed, 'The Holy Catholic Church'."⁴ That statement is a signpost on the road to Rome, whether they who made it acknowledge it as such or not. Even the ancient bugaboo "extra ecclesiam nulla salus" is now embraced, and its meaning is very Catholic. The perpetuity of the Church is seen guaranteed by Mt. 28, 20.⁵ The Catholic theory of the unity of civilization through Christendom, as given in Ralph Adams Cram's "The Great Thousand Years," with the expressed hope that the world may again through religion recover a new bond of unitive power is a "tremendously valuable truth which we (Protestants) can disregard only to our hurt."⁶

Citations could be multiplied, all indicative of the longing for the "One,

³*Christendom* IV (Winter 1939), 1, 85.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 87.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 96.

Holy, Catholic and Apostolic" Church, all leading, however haltingly, to that Church. But the statements are not made without some reserve. "Faith in the Church cannot rest in the visible organization with all its defects."⁷ This prompts the Catholic to inquire if such faith is weak because human defects are noticed in a Divinely instituted Church, or is frightened because the search may lead to Rome. That the road might lead to Rome seems to be either a conscious or unconscious fear in the minds of some who are genuinely interested in the movement. Otherwise, how explain such statements as, "We recognize the useful function bishops have played, and may still play, in the life of the Church. But we hesitate to accept them as part of a Divinely imposed order lest we commit ourselves in principle to a view of the Church, which, if followed to its logical conclusion, will lead us straight to Rome."⁸ And another, commenting on the necessity of the One Church being manifest in a united world Church, distinguishing Church on earth from Church Transcendent, says "In such a united world Church, however, the distinction between Church militant and Church Transcendent, between the historical Church and the one body of Christ must be maintained. To identify them is to commit the final blasphemy of Rome."⁹

The accusation, implicit in the last line, that Rome has identified them, is false, and error, we learn in Epistemology, is due to an undue influx of the will. The importance of study for the members of the World Council of Churches is clear. It will dissipate the ignorance which prompts such accusations as the one made above. It will lead to the realization that the present Protestant "discoveries" are, and have ever been, common Catholic doctrine. And the mere reading of any good textbook on the Church will bring clarification on many of the points still obscure. The Catholic doctrine of the communion of saints will lead the one speaking of the "final blasphemy of Rome" to blush, and retract.

American Protestants are interested in the World Council of Churches. But their participation in it presents at least two problems. One is denominationalism. Another is the idea of federation, as actuated in the Federal Council of Churches. Denominationalism, as a divisive force, is coexistent with the foundation of the American Republic. It is due, in part, at least, to the separation of Church and State put into the Constitution. For that separation was decided on in order that the denominations in the thirteen colonies might remain equal before the law. Had a national religion been adopted, on the European plan, the dissidents would be reduced to the status of sects. The separate growth of the denominations accentuated these differ-

⁷Ibid., p. 86-87.

⁸*Journal of Religion* XVIII (Oct. 1938), 4, 399.

⁹*Christendom* IV (Spring 1939), 2, 258-259.

ences. Hence, a plan of unity is bound to meet with a disinclination to sacrifice the differences which set the denominations off, one from another, in their growth. The idea of federation is accepted by the denominations, though all the Protestant bodies are not represented in the Federal Council of Churches. But federation is a hindrance to real unity, organic unity, since it is based on the principle of retention of differences while cooperating. The idea of federation does not lead to organic unity, does not consider it as a desirable goal. The World Council of Churches wishes to include all churches and strives for organic unity as its ultimate goal.

Admittedly, what is needed is an organization with authority and resources to act for all in matters in which all are agreed. No such organization exists in American Protestant life. The need of preaching the Gospel as Christians, and not as ministers of this or that denomination, is felt. The incorporation of religious teaching in the educational system is possible only if the denominations submerge their differences. More intense efforts must be made to achieve interdenominational worship and Communion. Ideas are not needed, there are plenty of them, but spiritual resources to accomplish them. Corporate union must be the goal, and the present division must not be accepted as final. The need of sacrifice is stressed, sacrifice of ease, personal convenience, money, time, prejudice, suspicions and fears.¹⁰

How have the individual churches responded to the call to unity? In May of 1939, members of the three branches of the Methodist Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church of the North, of the South, and the Methodist Protestant Church of America, met in Kansas City. They effected union. As an earnest of their sincerity, one negro bishop joined three white bishops in ordaining candidates for the Methodist ministry in Boston, January 16, 1940. But Methodists have a word of caution for those who want organic union speedily. Methodist reunion, in one form or another, has been sought for and prepared for over a period of sixty years. If it took sixty years to achieve reunion of three groups with a fundamentally common faith and worship, they point out, speed cannot be the watchword in achieving interdenominational communion, much less organic unity.¹¹

The Baptist approach to unity seems balked by the Baptist heritage of extreme independence and sectarianism. Organic union seems impossible with the Baptist concept of the Church, Orders and the Sacraments. Only those who have exercised faith personally in Christ shall be admitted to the membership in the Church, and they alone make up the Church. Hence, no infant baptism is admitted. The priesthood of all believers is the only priesthood Baptists acknowledge, though this does not mean equality of

¹⁰*Christendom* IV (Winter 1939), 1, 103-113.

¹¹*Id.* IV (Summer 1939), 3, 355-366.

function in the Church, since Baptists have ordained ministers. Baptism is a sign of grace already received. The complete autonomy of individual churches can be sacrificed by Baptists, as their contribution towards facilitating union. But they ask that the right to defer baptism, and the principle of the priesthood of all believers be admitted.¹²

The Presbyterian-Episcopalian approach to unity and efforts to effect intercommunion were commented on in *Theological Studies*, February, 1940. Further developments are these: Vigorous opposition from many Episcopalians, a friendly but firm indication that intercommunion is impossible without the Presbyterian acceptance of "Apostolic Succession" in the Anglo-Catholic sense.¹³ Presbyterians, on their side, will resist reordination, but will compromise on the "mutual extension of orders" theory.

It is clear from all this, that interdenominational communion is a long step past reunion of the various branches of the same denomination. And both steps are far from organic unity. Yet, it is felt that intercommunion brings organic unity closer. And it is admitted that the attitude towards the doctrine of orders has impeded intercommunion, where it was desired. There is this impasse. On the one hand, Episcopalians demand ordination by a bishop. On the other hand, no denomination will submit to reordination. A plan, seeking to obviate these difficulties, has been proposed. Essentially it is this: Create a common organ of ordination, and agree on minimum essentials. Let each denomination have its representative on the ordaining board. Then everyone will be ordained to the satisfaction of everyone, and interdenominational communion can be had wherever desired.¹⁴ Anyone familiar with the vicissitudes of unquestionably sincere plans of this type, in the ecumenical movement, knows what reception awaits this one. The difficulties it faces are inherent in the movement, and will be there until certain fundamental issues are met and settled.

One such fundamental issue is now being discussed in ecumenical periodicals. Its proper solution means real organic union with the "One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church." A compromise on the issue dooms the movement to ultimate failure. The issue: What is the nature and function of the Church? The Edinburgh Conference did not clarify the issue, but brought it out to the light of day. There are two concepts of the Church indicated in a *Report of the Meanings of Unity*, issued by the Commission on Unity in Life and Work. Various antonyms have been used to express the differences in concept, the report suggested "institutional versus spiritual," but others employ "visible versus invisible," "gathered versus

¹²*Christendom* IV (Winter 1939), 1, 68-80.

¹³*Id.* IV (Spring 1939), 2, 239-251.

¹⁴*Christendom* IV (Summer 1939), 3, 389-398.

given."¹⁵ The concept of the "given" Church is, essentially, that of the Roman Catholic Church (the author of the article in question ascribes it to Orthodox and Anglicans as well), and need not detain us here. The concept of the "gathered" Church is that of the Liberal Protestant, with generous help from the Modernists. It demands a personal God, dealing with personal beings, seeking spiritual ends, who can work only by personal means and in personal relations. This cannot yield something objective and infallible. There can be no Incarnation in a Catholic sense. There is no internal regeneration by sanctifying grace. Revelation has to be interpreted by the one receiving it, and so differs with the ages.

Simply and starkly put, this concept effectively outlaws God, Christianity and the Church. It is born of the freedom that enslaves man's mind by making him start all his thinking from a lie, the lie of independence. The very fact of his existence speaks of man's dependence on God. And that dependence imposes on him a few obligations which he cannot avoid. One of them is to accept the will of God in its manifestations. And man is not free to work out his own idea of God, nor of God's revelation, nor of God's Church. Man must be saved God's way, not select a convenient formula for himself. The fundamental misconception in speaking of the Church as "given or gathered" is in the *or*. The fact is that the Church is given by God *in order that* men may be gathered to the Church, and thus saved, until the end of time. The given Church is not merely a juridical body, insisting on recognition of its Divinely given authority. It is also, by Divine institution, a teaching and sanctifying body. And its doctrines and its means of sanctification are just as sacred to it as its authority. There is only One Christ, and there is only One Body of Christ, which is His Church. And that is a living, sanctifying, teaching and ruling body. It is Divinely given that men may be gathered to it. And the Divinely given Church alone knows accurately what God's plan for man's salvation is. To that Divinely given Church, man must go to learn God's plan. Christ is still "the way, the truth and the life." Those who seek a purely "gathered" Church will miss the way, be far from the truth, and only by a miracle of grace receive life.

¹⁵Id. IV (Spring 1939), 2, 164-173.