

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

Reordination and Reunion.

BY THE REV. H. T. MALAHER, B.A.

THE desire for Christian Reunion is growing stronger and stronger, but how are we to set about its attainment? on what principles is it to rest?

In this paper an attempt will be made to suggest the lines along which an answer to this question may be sought, with special reference to the subject of Reordination—a concrete and practical side of the question. Now Reunion is a question that must be dealt with as a whole, and on intelligent principles, otherwise the very success that may attend its earlier stages will become a hindrance to those that come later. For instance, should Home Reunion be achieved in a manner that is unwise, it will prove an almost insuperable barrier to the ultimate Reunion of Christendom as a whole. It is in this connection that the question of Reordination is seen to become of vital importance. Our aim, then, should be to conduct each separate stage with reference to the problem as a whole. What, therefore, shall be our method?—it must be one that proceeds by a recognition of the *facts* involved, and of *all* the facts.

This will immediately suggest to us that a party solution will never achieve success, because it would necessarily be one-sided. In practical politics it is, of course, impossible wholly to eliminate the party point of view; in fact, party has its legitimate place, since without its influence certain aspects of truth might fail to receive due recognition. But while we may find it necessary to work *as* a party, we should not work *for* a party. Only the non-party spirit is able to look in the face the whole of the facts involved.

Now the facts that dominate this problem are two. The first of these is the Fact that there exists a Catholic Church. By this is meant that amid all the divisions of Christendom a certain group of churches claim to be the legitimate local or sectional representatives of an historic or universal Society founded by

Christ Himself, and to be connected with that original Society and with one another by virtue of Apostolical succession—that is, the corporate preservation of historic and organic continuity with that original Society. But there is a Second Fact, equally certain, though sometimes but grudgingly allowed. It consists in the manifest working of the Holy Spirit in those branches of Christendom that lie beyond and outside this Historic or Catholic Church.

Any scheme for Reunion that is to ensure success must be one that takes account of *both* these great facts, allowing to each its due place. The practical difficulties attending any such attempt, however, are evident from the common experience that a strong sense of the importance of either of these facts is usually felt virtually to involve a denial of the importance of the other one. The strong believer in the Catholic Church demands as an essential preliminary the unconditional surrender by the non-Catholic of his whole claim to Christian Churchmanship; while the strong believer in the universal working of the Holy Spirit derides Apostolical succession and the importance ascribed to it as a figment of the sacerdotal imagination.

Even supposing such to be so, the existence of belief in the value of each of these facts would remain facts true for the psychological sphere in which Reunion is to operate—firm beliefs which are too widely held and deeply-rooted ever to be entirely overcome, and which any scheme of Reunion must consequently face and take into account. But since in that case these facts could not be faced and dealt with in the same spirit of intelligence and conviction as if they were true, not merely psychologically, but also theologically, it may be well to digress for a while and see if it is not possible to adopt some practical working theory of the Church which will enable these two beliefs to be harmonized both with Scripture and with one another.

These two facts are really but the expression of the twofold aspect and nature of the Church as represented in the New Testament. There may be found both an individualistic

aspect and a corporate, both a basic principle and a corporate expression thereof. The principle referred to is the entrance by baptism, upon profession of repentance, into a covenant relationship with God, bringing with it the inspiration and aid of the Holy Spirit. The whole company of people thus in covenant relationship with God, and members of Christ, is referred to as the Church of God, and, in its future ideal state, as the Body of Christ. But the Body of Christ was not intended even in its unpurified state (likened by our Lord to a field of wheat mixed with tares) to remain united by no bond other than a common baptism and a common profession of faith. It was plainly intended that the Church should be organized as a whole, and not remain a congeries of isolated individuals or small and independent groups. A definite Society, the historic or Catholic Church, was founded and provided with the beginnings of a regular ministry. Thus, in the New Testament, the two aspects of the One Church are seen to be complementary ; we may say that its aspect as the Church Catholic coincided with its aspect as the Church of God—that is to say, the Church of God consisted of Catholic Churchmen only, there were no Dissenters—non-conforming to the unity of the Church.

Apply this working theory to the situation as it is in the present day, and we see that these two aspects of the One Church no longer coincide, and the Church of God now contains a Non-Catholic element as well as a Catholic. Though this Non-Catholic element, by reason of its Nonconformity, is self-deprived of the fulness of the covenant blessing, yet we dare not unchurch them, as do some. Those whom God has acknowledged we dare not disavow.

In face of their compliance with the Scriptural conditions of faith and baptism unto repentance, and in face of the manifestation in their lives (both individual and corporate) of the power of God unto salvation, it is worse than folly to speak as if Catholic Churchmen alone possessed a practical monopoly of grace. Moreover, in condemning, and justly condemning, the sin of schism, we must not forget that the spirit of schism is, in

the sight of God, not far removed from the act of schism. Those parts of the Church which preserved the principle of Catholic unity did so, in some instances, at a considerable sacrifice of other sides of Catholic truth, and were in some cases themselves largely responsible for the breach by reason of their resolute clinging to old abuses in preference to reform. We must remember, too, that those whom we stigmatize as schismatics are not themselves responsible for the error of their forefathers, and in many cases they have not the vaguest conception of the Catholic Church, or of their duty to seek after communion with it. This is a case where theories must bow to facts ; in certain Non-Catholic quarters the outward signs of the working of God's Spirit are far more visible than in certain Catholic quarters. Non-Catholics may not, therefore, be unchurched. They are Churchmen, though not Catholic Churchmen.

Such is our working theory of the Church—the Church of God may be shown both by Scripture and experience to have a double aspect, and at the present day these aspects no longer entirely coincide. But they were intended to, there is no really insuperable reason why they should not coincide again, and such is the end towards which we are working. That end will be attained only by giving both great Facts their due. The advantage of such a method, and of such a statement of the question as the above, is that it makes no attempt to convert everybody to one particular point of view. Such a task would be hopeless, and so no attempt need be made to persuade the High Churchman to abandon belief in Apostolical succession and the Catholic Church, but rather he is asked to refrain from asserting certain narrow and exclusive deductions from these beliefs : nor is the Nonconformist asked to give up the belief that the Holy Spirit is blessing his work, but rather to refrain from imposing certain limitations and restrictions upon that blessing.

We come, then, to the practical question as to how the two facts that dominate the problem of Reunion shall have equal

justice done to them in actual practice. It takes concrete form in the controversy as to Reordination. Two solutions of the present state of affairs are proposed. One is that Non-Catholic Orders shall become Catholic—that is, universally recognized, by means of a mere Declaration of *Recognition* of their validity. The other solution is that they be treated as totally invalid, and *Reordination* be insisted on. Thus an impasse is reached, because either solution does injustice to one or other of the Facts, and is totally unacceptable to the opposite party. But surely there is a third alternative, obtainable by modification of the second proposal. Is it not possible to insist upon Regular and Catholic Ordination (Reordination) while at the same time refusing to treat their former commission as necessarily invalid. This form of Reordination might be termed *Extended Ordination*, in view of the wider extent of the sphere (a Church now united) in which the Commission is to operate. For so long as the needs of the future are met there is no need to pass judgment on the past and to decide either one way or the other the question as to whether the former commission was valid for its own narrower sphere ; let it suffice that the new needs of a Church extended by Reunion with another body require a minister that has received Catholic Ordination.

To the present writer it seems clear that the claims of what we have called the Fact of the Catholic Church *do*, in any scheme of Reunion, inevitably and undoubtedly demand an insistence upon *some* kind of Regular and Catholic Ordination. Only thus can a Non-Catholic ministry become a Catholic—legitimately representative, to the present generation, of the original Historic Church ; only thus can Reunion be made acceptable to the larger section of Christendom. The heritage of the Church of England is twofold, having both a Catholic side and a Reformed. Apostolical succession is an essential part of the Catholic side of our heritage ; as loyal Churchmen we can never consent to betray it—and betrayed is what it would come to, unless Reunion is to mean nothing more than interchange of pulpits.

But, on the other hand, if we demand that the Nonconformist shall respect the Catholic side of our heritage, his heritage also must be respected in turn. We should press for Catholic Ordination, not on the ground of the supposed invalidity of his Orders, but on the grounds of Apostolic Order, of expediency, of the preservation of their Catholic heritage to the churches (in possession of the same) with which union is contemplated. Why need an insistence on Catholic Ordination be considered to involve a denial of the whole previous Churchmanship of Non-Catholics? Non-Catholic Churchmen broke their connection with the Catholic branch of the Church because (rightly or wrongly) they felt it was the only way of securing their Evangelical heritage; and now, having secured it, there is no reason why they should not be welcomed back again to take up the rest of their heritage—the Catholic part of it. Let us not theorize about the past, let us deal, practically, with the present. Non-Catholic Orders were certainly not valid for Catholics, but need we insist that they were not valid for Nonconformists themselves? Whatever theory of Orders we may prefer for ourselves, we can at least refrain from forcing it upon others. Let us face the fact that Non-Catholic Churchmen have been blessed by God, and refuse henceforth to treat them as outcasts. We can do so without losing our own Catholic Churchmanship; it is only certain rigid *theories* of Churchmanship that we need to disregard. Mere *Recognition* does injustice to the first of our two great facts; *Reordination*, on the ground of the total invalidity of the previous commission, does injustice to the second fact; *Extended Ordination* does injustice to neither, and justice to both.

