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Why not "A Church of the British Nation" ?

THERE is a great body of doctrine, in accepting which, whatever their differences in other respects may be, all Christian men are absolutely at one. We have "One Lord, one faith, one baptism." On the other hand, there is nothing which hinders the progress of Christianity in the world at large more than the disunion which to-day exists among the different members of the Christian Commonwealth. These two facts seem contradictory to one another, but they are both true. It is evident therefore that the disunion can continue only through the fact of their essential union being forgotten or denied. Disunion being as prejudicial as union is beneficial, it should be the object of every true Christian to endeavour to discover and remove the causes of disunion as far as possible. The fact that there is this agreement upon the great mass of the leading fundamental doctrines of Christianity shows us that we must seek the causes of disagreement in the acceptance, on the part of certain sections of the Christian Church, of doctrines which are of less real importance. On examination we find that some of these distinctive doctrines are diametrically opposed to the teaching of Christ and His Apostles, while in other cases too much importance is ascribed to unimportant matters, or at least to things of merely secondary value. It is historically easy to trace some of them to non-Christian sources, as Bishop Lightfoot¹ has done in the case of the dogma of a Christian Sacrificial Priesthood distinct from the spiritual Priesthood of all believers. In the same way it has been shown by Dean Stanley and others that some of the ceremonies and the dress of the officiating ministers in certain Churches are of heathen, or at least of non-Christian, origin. This being so, it is hardly a matter for surprise that the introduction of such things should have had a disintegrating effect upon the Church of Christ.

The last great prayer of our Lord and Saviour before His crucifixion for us all was that we all might be one in Him.² We find also the distinct intimation that, if we are not, the world will not believe in His Divine Mission. We see therefore the absolute necessity, not only of agreeing in secret upon all the essential doctrines of

¹ *Dissertation on the Christian Ministry.*

² John xvii. 21.

Christianity, but also of *realizing* that agreement as fully as possible. Macaulay has well pointed out that to disunion and dissension between the various Reformed Churches was in large measure due the cessation of the progress of the Reformation in the rest of Europe, nay more, the loss of many countries where it had already achieved a very considerable degree of success. The Protestant Churches were in reality one in rejecting everything unscriptural in doctrine as well as in accepting all the fundamental truths of Christianity, as taught in the Creeds. But their differences on comparatively speaking trivial points prevented them from recognizing their unity. They therefore quarrelled with one another, and thereby gave their common foe an opportunity of which he was not slow to avail himself. In spite of this, Protestant Christians up to the present day have failed in this matter to learn wisdom from experience. We have not yet closed up our ranks, and hence there is always room for our opponents to step in and part us still further from one another.

The first essential in the way of effecting a cure for this state of things is to *realize* our unity and to take steps for some outward expression of it. Between ourselves on the one hand and the Greek and Roman Churches on the other there exists a barrier which at present seems insuperable. They have adopted and added to the teachings of Christ certain dogmas which are in direct opposition to the Gospel. These they insist on our accepting; and this we cannot do, because we are entrusted with the preservation of "the faith once for all delivered to the saints." We dare not mingle with it doctrines which are distinctly of heathen origin. We have seen in the past how these doctrines have corrupted the Faith, how they have led to the shedding of oceans of human blood, how they have driven men away from Christ. Hence, though we gladly and thankfully acknowledge that not a few members of these Churches, in spite of professing such doctrines, are one with us in love for our Lord and Master, yet at the same time we recognize that the attitude of these Churches towards ourselves, no less than our love for the Truth and our obligation to live and die for it (as many of our fathers did), still prevents any outward union with them. We can only hope and pray that they may return to the Gospel and cast away the accretions which have gradually rendered such Churches in large measure hostile to the truth.

But is there anything in the world which necessitates or even justifies the division of Protestant Christendom into so many different Churches? We know from history how these divisions originated, and we are also aware that it is both impossible and undesirable to endeavour to persuade all men to adopt the same forms, ceremonies, and method of Church Government. Such an arrangement, if it could possibly be adopted, would do incalculable harm by checking progress and crushing individuality. It would be contrary to Nature. All the branches of a tree are not exactly alike in form. An army may be one in allegiance to the sovereign, in obedience to its commander, in its patriotism; but all its regiments are not clad in exactly the same uniform, nor have they in every respect the same traditions or the same duties. It would be quite possible to imagine the different divisions of an army to be distinguished from one another far more than they generally are, without ceasing to co-operate with each other for the accomplishment of a common purpose. What would, however, be most prejudicial to the army, and would in all probability prevent it from succeeding in its object, would be for the various regiments composing it to forget that they were parts of one and the same army. If our battalions fighting in the present great War permitted *esprit de corps*—itself a very desirable thing—to lead them each to deny that the other regiments had any right to be considered portions of the army, if they refused to work in harmony with one another, then, no matter how great their loyalty might be, they would be unable to meet and defeat a strong and united foe. This, we fear, is too much the case at present with the Army of Christ Jesus. Whether or not they realize it, the various Reformed Churches *are* regiments in one and the same army. Dissensions between them are therefore not only injurious to the common cause but treasonable towards the Captain of our Salvation. Instead of accentuating and exaggerating our trivial differences, we should and could, without the least sacrifice of principle, co-operate with each other for the benefit of humanity, the evangelization of the world, and the glory of our Divine Master. We well know that such a course of conduct would be in complete accord with our Lord's desire, and that it is necessary for the accomplishment of His purpose of Redemption. It should therefore be the great object which we should seek to attain. We should let nothing—not even our dearest prejudices,

which generally spring largely from our ignorance of the beliefs of our fellow-Christians of other denominations—hinder its attainment.

It is unnecessary to inquire whether this unity is or is not a possible thing to reach. Christ never gives a command which cannot be obeyed. Difficulties may and do exist: but difficulties are well defined as "things to be overcome." Experience has already shown us that in this particular case they have even now begun to vanish. The existence of the British and Foreign Bible Society, of the Religious Tract Society, of the China Inland Mission, and of various other great philanthropic schemes, has proved that the different Protestant Churches—as far at least as many of their most zealous individual members are concerned—can work together, and that union is strength. Another proof of the same thing is afforded by what is called the "Comity of Missions." This has prevented any disagreement between the representatives of different Protestant Churches in the Mission-field. It is only where the unchristian sacerdotal spirit has manifested itself (as in the Bishop of Zanzibar's attitude towards the Kikuyu proposals recently) that, as we might expect, difficulties have arisen: and the sacerdotal spirit has no rightful place in any true Protestant Church. It certainly can claim no rightful place in the Church of England, as our Articles and Prayer Book and the writings of the leaders of our Church in the early days after the Reformation, such as Bishop Jewel and the "judicious" Hooker, clearly prove. From its surreptitious entrance into the Church in our own time may ultimately result the disruption of the Church of England. Whenever this spirit showed itself in the past, as for example in the days of Archbishop Laud, it led to religious persecution, the blame for which should rest, not on the Church of England, but on those who abused her name to propagate doctrines which she had repudiated. In obeying their Master's command to go and make all nations disciples, Protestant Christian Churches in drawing nearer to Christ have drawn nearer to one another. It would indeed be absurd, in the midst of Heathenism and Muhammadanism, if Christians were to quarrel with each other about the Episcopal or the Presbyterian form of Church government, about the use of extempore prayer or fixed forms of worship. In the presence of the Master, in the face of the foe, in view of the ignorance, misery, and degradation of men.

who know not God, all such petty differences sink into their proper insignificance.

The publication of a joint Catechism by so many of the Free Churches is another evidence, visible to all men, of the reality of the unity which underlies our diversity of names and forms. Probably there is hardly a single article in that Catechism which the Evangelical Members of the Church of England could not accept. Again, the fact that very many of the best hymns in the English language are common to all Protestant Churches proves that we are one in part at least of our actual worship even now—to say nothing of our use of the same version of the Bible in both public and private devotions. Such books as "Pilgrim's Progress," though written in prison by one suffering persecution for conscience' sake at the hands of his "Christian" fellow-countrymen, are; and for several generations have been, the common heritage of all Protestants throughout the world. The labours of John Wesley, Moody, and other men of like spirit, have been a blessing to all Protestant Churches alike. The unity so desirable between us *does* then already in some measure really exist, and should be openly recognized to the glory of God. It is, in fact, authoritatively recognized in the Communion Service of the Church of England, where the Church of Christ is defined as "the blessed company of all faithful" (i.e. believing) "people."

One of the most hopeful signs of the times is that people are beginning to feel how desirable it is that there should be some outward manifestation of the inward unity which already exists between Protestants. The question is, what steps should be taken to accomplish this? By demanding the recognition of "the historic Episcopate," the Lambeth Conference of 1888 virtually declared their intention of demanding terms of surrender on the part of the other Protestant Churches, and thus for a time hindered the accomplishment of a union so fully in accordance with the mind of Christ. Our knowledge of Church History enables us to see that the time for asserting (and expecting educated and reasonable men to believe) that Episcopacy is *necessary* either to the *esse* or to the *bene esse* of the Church of Christ has passed by for ever. On the one hand we have learnt beyond the possibility of dispute that the Episcopal "Order" (if we are strictly justified in using such an expression) arose in very early times in certain portions of the

Christian Church. On the other we perceive that it was a *development*—one no doubt very useful and calculated to play a very important part in the history of the Church, but not therefore to be deemed necessary for all time. Episcopacy in early days was so very unlike what is called by that name in England to-day that it might perhaps be questioned whether in the Church of England it can any longer be said to exist. We have something very much more like the Episcopacy of the first and second centuries in Episcopacy as it is now found in the Churches of Australia and New Zealand, and still more in the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Moravian Church. In the Mission-field to-day we see exactly how, almost necessarily, Episcopacy arose in the early Church. A foreign Missionary has committed to him the superintendence (*ἐπισκοπή*) of a large district, and all the native Pastors and catechists there are under his supervision. This is exactly what a Bishop had to do in the early Church, besides helping to ordain in conjunction with the other Presbyters, for he was reckoned as one of the Presbytery. What still further supports this view as to the development of the Episcopate from the Order of Presbyters is the fact that, as every student of the Acts of the Apostles knows, the words *ἐπίσκοπος* (bishop) and *πρεσβύτερος* (elder, presbyter)¹ were originally interchangeable terms, though the former was more commonly used among Gentile, the latter among Jewish (and Syrian) Christians. We also know that the Christian elder was in Greek cities styled *ἐπίσκοπος*, because his distinguishing functions were considered similar to those discharged by the civil functionaries who bore that title. Although it was natural, and doubtless in accordance with God's will, that Episcopacy should soon be established in most parts of the Christian world, it for a time failed to commend itself to the Churches in Rome, Corinth, and Alexandria. But the doctrine of the "Historic Episcopate" had not then emerged or evolved itself, and hence the other parts of the Christian Church never appear to have thought for one moment of denying the "Orders" of those who had, *e.g.*, in Alexandria, been ordained "by the laying on of the hands of the Presbytery." In the same way, for a long time after the Reformation, it is a matter of history that Episcopal Ordination was not considered by the Church

¹ The men who are styled *presbyters* (*elders*) in Acts xx. 17, are called *bishops* in v. 28.

authorities in England necessary before a man was admitted to hold a living in this country. Presbyterian ordination was recognized without the least scruple, just as by the early Church.

When therefore we find men discussing the question whether the Church of England can or cannot recognize the Orders and Sacraments of the other Protestant Churches, the thought occurs to one's mind, By what authority do we refuse to recognize them, since our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, the Head of the whole Universal Church, has unmistakably acknowledged and confirmed them? No one can be aware what grand work has been done in England, in America, and most of all in the Mission-field, by these Non-Episcopal Churches, without confessing that God is with them of a truth. If then the Captain of our Salvation has recognized in these men the gifts which He Himself must have conferred upon them, have they, after all, any real need of our recognition? Again, if the subordinate officers of an army do not recognize the appointments made by their Commander-in-Chief, do they not thereby render themselves liable to be dismissed for insubordination, if not mutiny? Judas Iscariot was undoubtedly an Apostle, whose claim to that title none could deny, while many could and did deny that of St. Paul. To which of the two should we prefer to trace our Orders? Is it possible for a reasonable man, a spiritually-minded Christian, to prefer Orders derived from a Leo X. to those which may have been conferred by a Wesley? Are the Orders which may be traced back to Archbishop Laud, of persecuting memory, preferable to those which may presumably have been conferred by men of the stamp of Moody or Spurgeon? "By their fruits ye shall know them."

At one time most people in England fancied that monarchy was the only system of political government which was pleasing to God. How they reconciled this view with the history of the Israelites as recorded in the Old Testament it is hard to understand, but so it was. We have broader ideas on the subject now. Acknowledging that a very strictly limited form of monarchical government suits us, we are able to see that another system of rule may suit other nations better. We now perceive that, although monarchical government is undoubtedly a quite legitimate form of rule, it is not the *only* system of government which God approves. It is time for us, therefore, in the same way to understand that, though Episco-

pacy is certainly an allowable method of polity for the Church, and has in the past proved very useful at times, yet it is not the only system that can lay claim to Divine approval. Nor must we confound names with things. The "bishops" mentioned by Ignatius did not hold quite the same position as those in the Middle Ages, or the latter that of our modern English territorial Bishops. History shews us that, whereas Episcopacy has been of great service to the Church at certain epochs, at others it has been the source of much injury. In this respect it resembles monarchy. God's grace is not limited to names and titles, any more than to the use of Latin or any other particular language in Divine worship. It is a matter of notoriety that all existing Churches differ very materially in forms, ceremonies, and manner of worship from those observed in the early Church, though the latter was not distinguished for a strict and rigid uniformity everywhere. The altered circumstances of modern times have doubtless not only justified but necessitated such changes. Why not recognize the legality of changes in the forms of Church government also, where necessary? The German Lutherans, for example, wished to retain Episcopacy at the Reformation, but well-known circumstances made it impossible to do so. Why blame them? Why indeed should any Church condemn another on such grounds as the form of Church government, when a monarchy would not be justified in refusing to recognize another state because its government was republican? No one particular form, ceremony, method of government, can justly be deemed essential to the existence of a true branch of the Vine. The one rule laid down for us in such matters is: "Let all things be done decently and in order."

Every Protestant Church that holds the essential doctrines of Christianity is a part of Christ's Church Universal. This is proved by Christ's continued presence and blessing. "Ubi Christus, ibi Ecclesia." Our own Nineteenth Article says: "The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in the which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly ministered according to Christ's ordinance in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same." This definition fits the case of all the other great Protestant Churches at least as well as it does the Church of England under existing circumstances.

"God is not the God of confusion but of peace." Therefore the days of our divisions should be ended. Then we should become in

some way one, outwardly as well as inwardly. Recognizing our inward and spiritual unity in Christ, we should endeavour so to act as to make that unity visible to the world at large.

It remains to inquire what way can be suggested of accomplishing this.

Is there any reason why, in this age of federations, there should not be a great Federation of Protestant Churches, independent of one another in government, in forms of worship, and in their particular shades of opinion upon less important questions, but all accepting as their minimum of doctrine the so-called "Apostles' Creed," or, better still, the "Nicene"? In addition to this it would be very desirable to adopt one, and only one, other Article of Agreement, affirming the all-sufficiency of the Eternal Priesthood of Christ and of His one sacrifice once offered for the sins of the whole world, and rejecting the Sacerdotal heresy, the Anti-Christian claim of the Pope to be Head of the Church and Vicar of Christ, and the doctrine of Transubstantiation. In relation to the latter point it would be hardly necessary to use stronger terms than those employed in our Thirty-First Article: "The sacrifices of Masses, in the which it was commonly said that the Priest did offer Christ for the quick and the dead to have remission of pain or guilt, were blasphemous fables and dangerous deceits."

In ancient times it was deemed desirable, in opposition to the Arian and other heresies, to add Article after Article to the Creed, explaining what was and always had been the true teaching of Christ's Church. In the same way every Protestant Church has drawn up its own Articles. We might now simplify these for the use of the Federation by summing up what is fundamental. The ancient Creed and one such Article as we have suggested, rendered necessary by the introduction of serious errors into the teaching of large sections of the professing Church, would really embody everything vital in the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England and in the Confessions and Catechisms of the other Protestant Churches. Each Church would retain her own Formularies as long as might be desired, but by their uniting in the Federation outlined above their essential unity would be declared and manifest to all men. The advantages which such a confederation would offer are obvious. Prejudice (and, in an ever increasing degree, ignorance) would vanish, and co-operation in all good work would follow as a

matter of course. We should present a united front to infidelity and every form of error, and we could labour together for the suppression of intemperance and all other vices, tyranny and oppression, for the relief of suffering, and for the spread of the Gospel both at home and abroad.

Consider what the condition of North America would be at the present time, were all the States of the Union entirely separate from one another. What a vast amount of power would have been lost, had they not united. Imagine the immense possibilities of discord which would exist. Instead of a great and mighty nation, we should have a large number of petty States, independent of one another, of no weight in the councils of the world, unable to express a united opinion, to carry out a common policy, to protect themselves from their enemies, parted from each other by endless jealousies and antagonisms, like those we see to-day in South America. This is practically the case with the Protestant Churches of the world. The motto "Divide et impera" was doubtless a wise, if hellish, one for the ancient Roman conquerors to adopt, but it was ruinous for the nations and tribes that permitted themselves to become its victims. So it is now with our Churches. It is impossible to imagine, much less to exaggerate, the access of strength, spiritual and material, which would accrue to us in every department of Christian work were we all united together as we should be. It is the clear duty of every Christian who loves his Master to do all in his power to realize our Lord's desire in this matter. The man who, instead of doing this, strives to accentuate the trivial differences between those who are in reality members of the one Body of Christ is guilty of great and criminal folly.

A beginning of this work of Federation might be made in the British Isles. We should then have a "Church of the British Nation" indeed. The Federation would soon spread throughout the whole English-speaking world, and would finally be joined by all the Reformed Churches everywhere. This would not in any sense involve the erection of a new Church; it would merely be the outward assertion and realization of the inward unity which already exists, and has always existed, between all true believers in Jesus Christ who have kept their faith undefiled and uncorrupted with error.