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The Historical Attitude of the Church of England to other Churches.[1]

IT is a particularly difficult task to summarize the immense mass of historical evidence which has to be taken into consideration in determining the attitude of the Church of England to other Churches in past history. I shall, therefore, refer only to what appear to be the most typical and illustrative facts in the stormy period from the Reformation to the Act of Toleration in 1689, although this omits some most instructive incidents.

I.

The Reformation involved of necessity an entirely different view on the whole subject of the Church. Up to that time the question, "What is the Church?" could obtain a very simple answer, whether correct or not we need not now enquire. The Church was virtually coterminous with Christendom; but the breach with Rome presented a new situation.

Christendom was broken into a number of different units, some of them Episcopal, some of them Lutheran, and some of them even less ecclesiastical in their Church polity. The cohesive power of the papacy was broken; all Christians no longer had the same supreme governor. Was, then, the Protestant world to remain a number of isolated units, each challenging the others? If not, where could be found some common unifying factor?

We know what the answer was: Loyalty to Scripture was the lowest common multiple accepted by the Protestants. With them the essential feature was acceptance of the test of Scripture, and acknowledgment of the teaching of the early fathers as supplementary and corroborative.

We are familiar with the way in which our Church affirmed that it stood or fell by Holy Scripture, and reference to the Articles will give us the authoritative pronouncements on this point.

With this fundamental agreement as to the authority of Scripture we would naturally expect that the Church of England would regard the Continental Protestant Churches with favour and friendship,

[1] A Paper read at the Cheltenham Conference on September 19.

and this was so. Towards Lutheranism the feeling was not so hearty, nor the intercourse so confiding, as in the case of other Reformed Churches, but there was a real consciousness of unity throughout the whole Protestant world.

The effect of the Protestant axiom, that Scripture was the final authority in all essential matters of belief, was far-reaching. How, for instance, did it affect theories of Church government? Protestants were obliged, it must be remembered, to reconstruct some fabric of Church government, for the break with the Pope had thrown the old system out of gear.

The Protestant world agreed that this could not be regarded as a subject upon which Scripture had pronounced in such a way as to make any system a divine necessity. The Continental Churches in some cases expressed regret that they had been unable to retain the ancient system of Episcopacy, and in other cases contended that their Presbyterian system was intrinsically better and more like the broad outlines laid down by the Apostles. But, generally speaking, it was looked upon as an open question, and the various opinions were not considered a barrier to unity and fellowship.

We must make careful note of our Church's authoritative pronouncements on this point. The Article which deals with the ministry resorts to a cumbrous circumlocution in describing those who should be regarded as lawful ministers, clearly so worded as to include the Continental ministries within the area of what was to be acknowledged; and the Article which deals with the Church lays down only two notes as tests of a true Church—pure preaching and the administration of the Sacraments. There is no mention of any system of government as necessary, or even as desirable; so much so, that the Bishop of Gloucester has stated in his work on the Articles that they go no further than claiming that "Episcopacy is an allowable form of Church government." Again, the Preface to the Ordinal is satisfied to make the positive statement that the threefold ministry existed from the Apostles' times; the negative clause, which occurs later on, forbidding any but episcopally ordained men from ministering in our Church, was not added till 1662, and then for a specific reason, which we shall note in due course.

These statements in our formularies were faithfully acted upon by the Bishops of those days. They looked upon all the Reformed Churches as sister Churches, and up to the end of Elizabeth's reign

it would be hard to find a representative divine who suggested ever so indirectly that the non-Episcopal Churches of the Continent were lacking in any essential whatever.

II.

This important point needs elaboration, and there is ample evidence forthcoming to prove that in all respects they were looked upon with reverence and love, and regarded as efficient and divinely sanctioned Churches. We will note some of the lines of proof.

In drawing up the Prayer Book free use was made of the advice of the Continental divines. Their opinions were eagerly sought, and in many parts of the Book their hands can be plainly traced. Indeed, it was the boast of some of our leading men that in doctrine we differed from them but "a nail's breadth," and the statement was made with no small satisfaction.

Secondly should be noted the even more practical expressions of this regard for the sister Churches across the seas, when their members were persecuted and driven from their own lands. At different times they came to England, but always, and by all classes of Churchmen, they were welcomed warmly. They were even given some of our churches to worship in, and we can find interesting relics of this fact in the church in Austin Friars and the crypt of Canterbury Cathedral, where the descendants of these refugees still worship.

Similarly, when our countrymen fled abroad in Mary's reign and at other times, the same hospitality was shown them. Where English Colonies established themselves churches were given to them for public prayer, and in other districts smaller groups were welcomed to the Reformed Churches and admitted to full Christian privileges, which were gratefully accepted. I have often thought that this most interesting chapter in our Church's history would well repay the careful examination of a leisured scholar. There is a great deal of scattered information as to the life of these English refugees on the Continent which has never been gathered together.

We have observed so far that our Church regarded the non-Episcopal Churches as equals, invited their opinions upon the Liturgy, welcomed their adherents to our places of worship, and accepted a like kindness at their hands. But we must add some additional facts to make the case complete.

There were repeated attempts to bring about a federation of all Protestant Churches. Cranmer was most zealous in this matter. In 1548 he approached Melanchthon, Calvin, and Bullinger with a kind of draft programme, but the Marian persecution made his attempts abortive. Parker made a similar attempt later on, and Sancroft, definite High Churchman though he was, engaged in a correspondence with a leader of the Dutch Church, in which he expressed an eagerness for some form of union. Though nothing definite came of any of these plans, they are none the less facts of great significance.

Again, we must note that for a long period after the Reformation non-episcopally ordained men were admitted to benefices with cure of souls in our communion. The extent of this practice is a matter difficult to determine. One contemporary authority declares that he knew personally more than one of these men in foreign Orders, while Clarendon, a recognized historian of his own day, whose personal bias was all against the practice, states that " there were many and at present (i.e., in 1662) there are some " who were Incumbents of benefices in England who had received non-Episcopal Ordination in France and Holland. We cannot detail the evidence; it is surprisingly strong, and it really deserves more careful attention than it has usually received, for no fact is more conclusive as to the attitude of our Church at that time on the whole subject of Church government than this. We read not only of Bishop Andrewes appointing French ministers to incumbencies in the Channel Isles, but of Bishops here in England encouraging the non-Episcopalians, and of one of them even telling an applicant for advice, who was a little uneasy as to whether he ought to seek re-Ordination, that he did not think his scruples justified.

III.

Those of our brethren who do not favour the opinions which this paper is intended to express, disparage this evidence (now that they have abandoned the futile attempt to deny it) by saying that these things were the acts of individual Bishops for which the Church could not be regarded as responsible. For instance, Archbishop Grindal of Canterbury issued a licence in 1582 to a Scottish Presbyterian minister to serve in our Church, and as this licence specifically gives permission to celebrate the Sacraments, it con-

stitutes a very awkward piece of evidence. But the answer is advanced that this was simply the act of an individual Bishop.

Similarly, when an official deputation went from England to the Synod of Dort in 1618 the obvious inference that this act indicated the brotherly regard of our Church for the Continental Protestants is met by the statement that it is only a proof that *the deputation* (75 per cent. of whom either were, or afterwards became, Bishops) held the foreigners to be fellow-members of the Church Catholic.

We must be fair to this line of reasoning, though it is such palpable special pleading, for a society cannot be charged with responsibility for what individual members may do. But when representative and leading men systematically pursue certain lines of conduct and no protest is made by the society it is quite fair to decide that those leading men are expressing fairly the feeling of the main body. Such was the case in those days in the Church of England. It matters little what we read of contemporary writing whether it be the *Zurich Letters*, *Strype's Histories*, the *Anglo Catholic Library*, etc., the same fact always emerges in different form—viz., that our Church regarded the non-Episcopal Churches of the Continent as suffering from no vital defect in being deprived of Bishops.

Naturally enough, when powerful and learned opposition demanded that our Church should dispense with Episcopacy the proposition was fiercely contested by champions of the old ways. Indeed they said little which we here would not endorse on that point. We know that this situation actually arose when the Dissenters got the upper hand. It is a dreadful chapter in English history, and every page is shameful reading. Happily, it needs no attention here, but it was in consequence of the demand by the English Dissenters that they should retain the benefices which they had occupied during the commonwealth, and from which the original incumbents had been ejected, that the clause to which we referred in the Preface to Ordinal was added, in 1662, forbidding any but an episcopally ordained man from holding a benefice in our Church.

It was argued that those who had deliberately broken away from an Episcopal Church for insufficient reasons were in a totally different position from those who had reluctantly parted with Episcopacy as the price of loyalty to truth.

IV.

This brings us to a new question which closely concerns us to day.

Granted that Episcopacy is not absolutely essential to the constitution of a true Church, and this is undoubtedly the official position of the Church of England, what are sufficient grounds for breaking away and forming another assembly, which will do the best it can with another system of government? It is a nice question. For instance, was Wesley justified in ordaining Coke as Bishop, and Whatcoat and Vasey as Presbyters for America in 1784, when he found it impossible to make our Bishops see their responsibility in the matter? I leave the Conference to debate such questions.

But to return to old times. Though the Nonconformists were excluded from official positions in our Church in 1662 they were always regarded as members. They were expected to attend the Holy Communion in their parish churches, and grave legal penalties were visited upon them for refusal. On the other hand, many of our clergy joined them at the Lord's Supper in their conventicles in order to show their regard for them, and permitted the Nonconformists to receive the Sacrament standing when they came to celebrate at the parish churches.

Let us not forget these facts to-day when we are told that Nonconformists are ineligible to come to our Communion tables. The plain facts of history demolish such an opinion.

Schemes of comprehension were also proposed to unite Nonconformity and the Church, in which it was suggested that some form of conditional Ordination might be used. But all these good intentions and elaborate schemes were wrecked, largely on political grounds, and the inheritance of a divided Christianity at home left to us in this twentieth century.

This very hasty summary of great happenings will have to suffice, but as I said at the outset, only a rapid and superficial survey is at all possible. But I hope that the conclusion is quite plain.

Look where we may, we find in those days a larger spirit than is seen to-day. More tolerant opinions upon the question of the ministry were dominant, and even when Churchmen were smarting under the sting of cruel persecution from their non-Episcopal fellow-countrymen they behaved with a charity and caution which dwarfs

anything exhibited in our day. I do not mean to suggest that the Churchmen of those days all regarded the Nonconformist ministers as in a similar situation to the Continental ministers. We must take all the circumstances into account to estimate the position. Our forbears had endured hard things at Nonconformist hands, and yet they appreciated the need for unity so fully that they pleaded with and coaxed the Nonconformists to come and worship with them, and strove to find some easy way in which solid unity might be achieved without the sacrifice of principle on the part of either Dissenter or Churchman.

Our conclusion, then, is this: Look where we may we shall find it difficult to discover in those days the narrow and short-sighted spirit which prevails to-day. We who hold the charitable view need have no fear lest past history should witness against us; it is, indeed, one of our strongest allies. In our earnest hope for a more solid union of all Christian forces at home and abroad we are only putting into practice the prayer prescribed by Canon 55 in 1604: "Ye shall pray for the Holy Catholic Church of Christ, that is, for the universal assembly of Christian people, dispersed throughout the world." We pray *for* them, and we want to pray *with* them too.

We are bidden to satisfy our desire for unity by co-operating with our Christian fellow-countrymen merely in social and moral questions. But we want a great deal more than this, and we have a right to an answer when we ask why we should be narrower to-day than were the "latitude men" of the seventeenth century, and we are entitled to an answer when we ask why our Communion tables should be barred against Nonconformists when 200 and more years ago they were encouraged in every way by legislation as well as by more kindly methods to join us at the Lord's Supper.

This narrow spirit, which has played such havoc with English Christianity, will be even more disastrous in the Mission field if it be allowed freely to operate there. This is the crisis which faces us to-day. The men of the days of the Reformation, with the menace of Rome threatening them, felt the need for brotherhood with their fellows. We have something a great deal more terrible facing us: I mean the awful possibility of a widespread retrogression to unbelief at home, which will also handicap the work of the Christian Church in all its operations abroad.

Religion is in an anxious position. At home and abroad we are

faced with a fearful array of the enemy's forces, and we need a sense of solid brotherhood, we need a union of forces to meet the enemy with any hope of success.

Like the Reformers, we must make up our minds that it is only essential principles which shall divide us from our fellow-Christians, and, like them, I feel sure, if we study the facts we shall discover that the question of Church government is not one of these essential principles.

Otherwise, I can only utter a warning which cannot be better expressed than in the words of Sir J. R. Seeley, "We see religion suffering veritably the catastrophe of Poland, which found such a fatal enjoyment in quarrelling, and quarrelled so long that a day came at last when there was no Poland any more, *and then the quarrelling ceased.*"

H. A. WILSON.