

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

Editorial

ALL Saints' Day appropriately saw the publication of an Open Letter to the Archbishops of Canterbury and York on the subject of Intercommunion, signed by 32 theologians of the Church of England. Included among the signatories were the Ely, Lady Margaret's, and Norris-Hulse Professors of Divinity in the University of Cambridge, the Regius Professor of Ecclesiastical History in the University of Oxford, former Regius Professors of Divinity in the Universities of Cambridge and Oxford, the Van Mildert Professor of Divinity in the University of Durham, the Principals of six theological colleges, the General Secretary of the Church Missionary Society, and sundry university dons. Whether the letter was timed with an eye on the assembly of the World Council of Churches in New Delhi we cannot say; but, if it was opportune for this reason (and the news of its contents must have been welcome to the majority of those meeting in New Delhi), it was even more opportune because of the urgent need for some impressive move to arrest the impulse which has been threatening to accelerate the Church of England into a situation of exclusiveness compatible neither with the New Testament nor with its own traditions.

While affirming their belief that the acceptance of the historic episcopate is "the best means whereby a reunited church may be given a fitting form in which its inward unity in Christ may be manifested", the signatories recognize "that it is our Lord who calls and commissions His ministers, and that He is not tied to any one form of ministry"—so much so, that He conveys through non-episcopal ministries "the same grace of the Word and Sacraments as He bestows through the historic ministry of bishops", and He does this, "not as an act of uncovenanted mercy, but because they are real and efficacious ministries within the Body of His Church".

This declaration expresses clearly and unambiguously a position which, if we have regard to the lessons of our Church's past, must be described as genuinely Anglican, and to which this journal has borne consistent testimony. It is a fact of history that full reciprocal intercommunion between the Church of England and other Reformed, albeit non-episcopal, churches existed traditionally and without inhibition in former years. It would be interesting to know when and by what official decree this state of full communion between the Church of England and fellow Reformed churches was terminated. Happily, this charitable custom of reciprocal hospitality is still alive in our Church today, and there are signs, of which this Open Letter is the latest, that churchpeople are becoming increasingly aware once again of its rightness. Yet at the present time the Church of England, in its official presentation of itself, would seem to be standing on its

head, since we are now assured that we are in communion with churches which may be precisely designated as unreformed, such as the Old Catholic and the Orthodox Churches, and not with our former intimates, the Church of Scotland and the Reformed churches of the Continent. But by what authority are these decisions made? And are they indicative of the true situation? Is it not a case of our church being led by the nose by an officialdom which, however excellent in other respects, shows insufficient respect for the history of the Church of England and the theology of our Prayer Book and Articles? And can it be doubted that those who are now calling for a return to the old paths are expressing the desire of the majority in our church?

With regard to schemes of union or reunion, the signatories stress that "where separated churches come together in a rite of unification, their ministers receive an extension of their existing authority which had previously been limited to the particular church in which each has been ordained". We are convinced that a definite declaration of what is (and, if necessary, what is not) involved is essential if rites of unification are to mean anything real in the coming together of separated churches. This was shown plainly enough in the Convocation debates earlier this year as to whether or not the proposed Church of Lanka in Ceylon should be accorded the status of being in full communion with the Church of England. In the Lanka scheme the precise significance of the rite of unification was designedly, it would appear, left undefined, so that anybody could put whatever interpretation upon it he wished. Accordingly, one of our bishops is reported to have observed that the rite would be at one and the same time an ordination if and where that was needed, and, where it was not, a public act of "identification". In other words, those who regard episcopacy as absolutely essential to the being of the Church would treat it as an ordination, a conferring of valid orders, on ministers from non-episcopal churches, but for themselves, who acknowledge no such lack, as no more than an identifying gesture. The outlook for the ecumenical movement is a sorry one if it is imagined that ambiguity can be exalted to become one of the cardinal virtues, or that difficulties, and especially cruces of division such as the question of the validity of orders, can be left behind by refusing to face them openly and by covering them with double-talk. A yawning crevasse covered over with gleaming snow is not less but more dangerous. Differences, therefore, should be discussed frankly, charitably, and scripturally, and mended, not by vague wool-pulling, but with the strong cord of theological definition.

The 32 theologians of the Open Letter express their dissent, further, from the statement contained in the Report of the 1958 Lambeth Conference that "Anglicans conscientiously hold that the celebrant of the Eucharist should have been ordained by a bishop standing in the historic succession, and generally believe it to be their duty to bear witness to this principle by receiving Holy Communion only from those who have thus been ordained". "We do not acknowledge such a duty," they say, "and we know that our conviction is shared by many other Anglicans. Moreover, we hold that our view is in full accord with the teaching of our church and its tradition as both Catholic

and Reformed." This is not, of course, the first time that this notorious statement of the Lambeth Report has been strongly criticized; but it is gratifying that it should now have been denounced by so distinguished a group of theologians.

The Open Letter has stimulated a prolonged correspondence in *The Times* as well as in the church newspapers, and it has also provoked a rejoinder in the form of a second open letter addressed to the Archbishops of Canterbury and York by 53 members of the House of Laity of the Church Assembly, who described themselves as "non-theologians" and, in opposition to the 32 theologians, declared their adherence to the rigorist view of episcopacy as essential for a valid ministry. One began to fear that our long-suffering Archbishops were going to be submerged under a cascade of open letters. But there has been no news of any further blasts and counter-blasts of this nature. *The Times* did, however, publish (on November 23) a significant letter from certain other members of the House of Laity "wholeheartedly and strongly" endorsing "the call put forward by the distinguished theologians for a more charitable policy on inter-communion", and asserting that they would conceive it their duty in the Church Assembly "to proclaim and to endeavour to make truly effective the historic principle that the Lord's table should be freely open to the Lord's people, remembering that it is His table, not ours, to share"—a conviction which, as our readers well know, is approved by this journal.

The doctrine of episcopacy, it is now plain, will be a determining factor in the whole future development of the ecumenical movement. If that doctrine conceives of episcopacy as constitutive of ministerial and sacramental validity and indispensable to the structure of the Church, then it presents an insuperable barrier to full union and fellowship with non-episcopal churches which cannot conscientiously appropriate such a doctrine with all its implications. But if that doctrine conceives of a bishop as exercising an essentially pastoral oversight over but not above his fellow-presbyters in their respective spheres of responsibility, as a guardian of the apostolic faith of the New Testament, and for these reasons as a centre of Christian unity, then it could be a means of knitting together again the limbs of the broken Body of Christ in our land. Meanwhile, as a matter of Christian principle, the Lord's Table must be kept open to the Lord's people. In short, we should now cease to think and speak in terms of separate and self-enclosed "communions" (Anglican, Presbyterian, Methodist, and so on)—a concept which implicitly contradicts the oneness in Christ of all believers: would it not be truer and more realistic to call them "disunions"?—and determine to think, speak, and act in terms of the Apostle's doctrine of the communion of "all men everywhere who invoke the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord as well as ours" (1 Cor. i. 2, N.E.B.).

* * * *

During last month's session of the Church Assembly a motion proposing that the term "altar" (which is *not* found in the Book of Common Prayer, from which it was purposely excluded) should be

introduced as an alternative to the designation "communion table" in the title and text of draft Canon G2 was passed in the House of Laity despite the voicing of serious objections. Thereupon the House proceeded to pass another motion which proposed that the designation "holy table" should be substituted for "communion table" so that the wording should not be at variance with the terminology of the Book of Common Prayer! Inconsistency of this kind is the opposite of impressive and is not calculated to enhance the reputation of the House as a place of discernment and sound judgment.

To harmonize the terminology of the Canons with that of the Book of Common Prayer is a sound principle, for the compilers of our Prayer Book exercised meticulous care in their choice of language. This is not to deny, of course, that some of the words they used are now antiquated and need to be replaced by terms which communicate effectively the intended sense to the congregations of our day. But the word "table", it is hardly necessary to say, is not one of those words. And it should be appreciated that, however widespread may be the use of the term "altar" at the present time, those who oppose its inclusion in our formularies do so for reasons that are not frivolous. (To urge the acceptance of a theologically loaded term merely on the grounds that it is commonly used *is* frivolous.) Their objections are precisely those which caused our Reformers to exclude the designation "altar" from the Prayer Book—namely, that the sacrament of Holy Communion was instituted by our Lord around a table, not before an altar; and, further, that an altar, as specifically the place of the offering up of sacrifice, is as such inappropriate to the dominical doctrine of the sacrament as not the thing itself but something done in remembrance of that unique act of love which procured our eternal redemption. Few are likely to dispute the Biblical teaching that there is but one Christian altar, the actual cross of Calvary, but one sacrificing priest, the Lord Christ, and but one atoning sacrifice, that of Christ Himself offered once for all on the cross. The Holy Communion, in a word, is a sacrament and not a sacrifice. It is indeed a pointer to the one Sacrifice and a means to the faithful of embracing its benefits. But, as Augustine and Hooker and many others have observed, to identify a sign with the reality which it signifies is to overthrow the nature of a sacrament. This, however, is exactly the effect which the use of the term "altar" has when connected with the eucharist. It confuses the symbols of bread and wine with the reality to which they point. It does away with the table as the place of hospitality and fellowship around which fellow-Christians meet in communion with their Lord and with each other. It promotes a type of sacerdotalism which belongs to the superseded order of the Old Testament, not to that of the New.

The use of the term "altar" as a substitute or alternative for "table" is, therefore, an abuse which should be discouraged, both because it is incompatible with the sacramental doctrine and language of the Book of Common Prayer, and also because the two terms are not synonymous and therefore cannot sensibly be pressed as interchangeable.

P.E.H.