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Uniformity and Nonconformity

By James Atkinson

IT was the Act of Uniformity in this country that created Nonconformity. Nothing is more destructive of real unity and the life of the Spirit than legislation and pressure to impose uniformity. Man always prefers the neat and tidy monolithic structure, and those with an itch to rule ever tend to impose a uniformity on the institution they are called to serve. But actuality is a rich confusion, and the simplifications of uniformity answer neither to the nature of the institution nor yet to the needs of the men who make up this body or organism. Uniformity, which lies near to the heart of Rome, has not normally been a prime concern for Protestantism : where Protestantism has expressed itself in uniformity it is a uniformity which has been an expression of the inner unity of the Spirit as a fruit of sound doctrine.

The important time for Anglicanism was the Reformation and the century following, as it was for Protestantism generally, but it still needs saying, and at the highest level, that all the Reformers were convinced not only of the sufficiency but also of the soundness of their particular church. To the Roman sneer, " Where was the Protestant church before Luther ? " there are many answers and not the least succinct that of Adams : " Before the dayes of Luther . . . an universall Apostacie was over the face of the world, the true Church was not then visible; but the graine of trueth lay hid under a great heape of popish chaffe " (*Works*, p. 556). Protestantism never saw itself as a new faith based on a new revelation, but rather as a protest for the original sound theology of the evangelical concern of the early Church against a church which, through centuries of accretions and corruptions, preferred its human traditions with an obstinacy as terrifying as its blindness. Luther always saw himself as a reformer of a wrong faith in the interests of a true faith, as one who sought to set the Church spinning in her true gravitational field of Christ and the Gospel and not the false one of the Pope and his decretals. He always described himself as a reformer not an innovator. As Cranmer was to say when Mary called him to discuss " his innovations ", innovations were the mark of Rome not the Reformation, which sought to root them out. Calvin's pure concern was in the interests of original Christianity and in the time of the writing of our own Prayer Book urged Cromwell, Bucer, and whom he could, for a purer and more drastic concern about the relics of Rome in dangers of being retained in the Prayer Book and for the utter abolition of any and all rites which savoured of superstition. As our own Bishop Andrewes expressed it, "*Renovatores modo sumus, non Novatores* : We are just renovators, not innovators" (*Works*, III, p. 26).

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If we look right back to our antecedents, it is hard to find any evidence either that uniformity was much sought after or even that it was ever achieved. God called Abraham " when he was but one, and blessed him and made him many ", but if the *ecclesia* of the Old Cove-

nant later evolved a uniformity it was at the expense of her unity. The "remnant according to the election of grace" always had the unity of the Spirit "but the rest were blinded". The centre of Old Testament uniformity came to be the Temple with its hierarchical inherited priesthood, its altar, its sacrifices. But "they are not all Israel which are of Israel; neither because they are Abraham's seed are they all children". Tares grow in the wheat, some branches of the vine are fruitless. The real unity is not found in uniformity but in the Spirit. We cannot even assert that the Old Testament *ecclesia* had but one ritual, one public form of worship, as we have one Prayer Book. The ritual concerned the priests and the offering of sacrifices. There was no universal liturgical form for the laity. At most the masses put in three appearances per year at Jerusalem. It was the synagogue that gave them their daily and weekly worship, and here there were no uniform set forms but marked flexibility allowing wide divergences of creed and practice.

A similar state of affairs obtains in the New Testament *ecclesia*. Christ did not organize an external church with authority over all believers all over the world. It was *the doctrine* He committed to His successors: their authority lay in that, not that they were His successors. Each local community seems in its own ordering of things utterly free, and there was no central, external power to which to appeal. The unity of the *ecclesia* consisted in its members being taught by the Holy Spirit (1 Jn. 2: 20, 27) and filled with Him, holding the truth of Christ and His work, the Spirit proving His presence by signs and wonders and expansion. All true believers have but one Father, all true believers are saved by faith in Christ alone, all true believers are united in one fellowship of the Spirit as one body which is invisible, all bearing love one to another. When Christ prayed in the upper room for the unity of His disciples, He prayed the Father to keep them in His name. Christ meant unity of doctrine, never a geographical, still less a hierarchical unity of structure. The early Christians had a real unity even while they were still worshipping at synagogues.

When the Romanists speak of unity they think in terms of their idea of organizational unity under Rome. Their view of unity is external, where all hold the same faith, all practise the same ritual, and all are subject to the pope of Rome. But if this were unity then we have never known unity, and what is worse, God failed in Christ to give that unity. The truth is, the Roman view of unity is not the Christian view of unity. The Roman seeks unity in uniformity, but Christ gives unity in Himself to all believers. Moreover, for centuries the Church has been split into bodies who mutually excommunicate one another. All the Eastern churches, the great Russian church, and all the Protestant churches have, at different times, and for the sake of truth, been compelled to withdraw from the Roman authority. These will never be united as churches with a uniformity of doctrine, liturgy, order, and practice, but their members might be united as Christians.

The Reformers are often blamed for having split the Church. But the unity of the Church is neither created by uniformity of forms and constitutions, nor is it broken by a diversity of these. The Church is that long line of men and women elected by God who respond in faith

to His call. We must free our minds from everything ecclesiastical and everything priestly when we think of the Church. It was founded by God in the lay heart of Abraham, and was reconstituted with a new covenant by the lay Jesus Christ. Its early teachers were all laymen, and its theology utterly lay. The organization of the Church is derivative of this first principle and never determinative of any doctrine : the Church exists only to preach faith and re-create faith in human hearts by its ministry and ministrations. Neither its ministry nor its ministrations subsume the Gospel, but exist to make that Gospel clear to men. The Church did not create the Gospel and has no authority over it : it is under its judgment (a saving one) as much as the worst of sinners and outsiders.

No outward form is a necessity for the being of a church, neither is an ordained ministry of any kind essential to its existence. God is neither tied to His Church nor tied by His clergy and ministers. God calls whom He will, and in their believing response He creates His Church and sends His Holy Spirit. The Church is the body of Christ. All members are all believers and are all brothers in Christ. If the true believers find themselves in different denominations they are nevertheless one in faith, and one in Christ, in spite of their denominational divisions. Uniformity makes no contribution here. If an unbeliever kneels at the Lord's table beside a believer they are not thereby members of the Church as they are not one in faith nor one in Christ. This is what the great phrase " the communion of saints " means, the communion of all whom God calls. Such a Church is invisible in so far as none of us can see into our brother's heart. It is known only to God. Uniformity is not unity, and certainly its external imposition makes for a human neatness rather than divine fitness.

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Where the central idea of the Church is understood in this scriptural way as an invisible Church of true believers, it will be seen at once that any visible part of that Church can never declare how the Church ought to be governed and ruled, nor ever seek to impose any form of uniformity on any other part of it. Such imposition is bound to issue in protest and nonconformity among the finest and most faithful members, as well as to impair our biblical foundations and our unity in the Spirit.

Examine, for example, the matter of episcopacy. The Reformers, including our English Reformers, did not consider the episcopal ministry as of divine appointment. Luther sought only to root out a secular, non-theological corrupt prelacy and to restore Christianity's traditional scholarly, pastoral, and evangelical episcopacy to the Church. Calvin was not opposed to the retention of episcopacy as such. Like Luther he related episcopacy to the preaching of the Word, the one characteristic common to all ministers, but conceded its value for government and order. His opposition was to a monarchical prelacy destructive of New Testament Christianity. Bishops, presbyters, and pastors were synonymous terms to Calvin, as they are to the New Testament writers generally. It was when the Church in certain areas refused to see the truth of Luther's reasonable historical analysis, in which areas society was organized under a prince determined to keep it so, that the Church in those areas went on wilfully

blind to lead the woefully blind, preferring adherence to Rome rather than the Gospel. Where the bishops and princes would not work with him Luther worked without them, but not one crumb of the precious Gospel was wasted because those new churches had neither bishops nor episcopally ordained clergy, neither was the real nature of the Church as the people of God impaired. In fact the contrary happened. Men realized more keenly the cleansing sweetness and great comfort of the pure Gospel once more, and enjoyed the present peace with God and the hope of eternal glory with Him, and at the same time the layman was given a theological musket to fight in the great Church militant against the popish aggressor. The layman knew better than ever before what it was to be a member of the Church. He knew what the essentials of faith were, and could now differentiate it from all the externalities Rome made into faith, such as the mass, the worship of saints, its Maria-centricity, its works religion, its indulgences and satisfactions and pilgrimages, the utter priestliness of it all. In short, what triumphed was the Gospel, and men saw that this was imperishable, universal, and catholic. But they also saw that where the rest was not wicked and scandalous (for example, church buildings, church customs, church traditions, clerical dress, and government), then it could be admitted as historic matters of form and order ; it could be viewed as sound tradition which had grown up with Christianity, but not universally applicable nor even universally necessary. They knew that episcopacy was a matter of order and government, and not a part of the Gospel, and that the Gospel could flourish with or without it, and even that all such matters were subject to the Gospel. On this point our English Reformers were of one mind with Luther.

Of their apostolic succession the English bishops were never in any doubt, but they were equally never concerned to maintain it, for succession to them was one of theology and not of sees. Even John Keble, when he was later to edit Hooker's works, marvelled that the English bishops had made so little of their historical prerogative. To the English Reformers it was soundness of doctrine, evangelical zeal, and pastoral care which proved the succession : it was the total absence of these that gave the lie to the papal claims. By apostolic succession the Anglican means essentially an organic succession of the apostles' doctrine and not a long line of bishops. It is a succession of thought, not of sees. This is how Augustine and the ancient Church understood it : the succession to them meant the succession and the success of the pure Gospel. Where the long line was historically maintained—for example, in Finland, Sweden, or England—all to the good ; where it was broken owing to historical necessity and hostile lay lords—princes, for example, in France, Germany, and Switzerland—nothing vital to God and the Gospel was yet lost. The English Reformers sought to maintain the succession of New Testament doctrine, and that was all that had been committed to them. No more, but no less. Jewel, Whitgift, and others argued for soundness of doctrine rather than church government, which in their view might vary with time and place. Other foundation could no man lay than had been laid in Christ, but matters of church government and order were, and must ever remain, the care and concern of an evolving Church in a changing world.

Our Reformers resisted alike the Puritan obstinacy and left-wing spiritualists in seeking to bind the Church in a straitjacket of a biblical pattern as necessarily final for all time, as well as the Roman obstinacy which claimed divine sanction for its hierarchy. Hooker developed Whitgift's distinction between matters of faith and doctrine as " necessary ", and matters of ceremonies, orders, and government as " accessory ". An Anglican may concede an ecclesiastical polity as of God (knowing full well that a lawful secular government is also of God), but he knows that episcopacy in any and every communion may claim no more than apostolic origin and authority, never dominical.

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The Church of England teaches that from the Apostles' time there have been three orders of ministry at least in germ : bishops, priests, and deacons. It believed its own orders historical and valid, but never sought to discredit or criticize or reject the orders and ministries of Reformed ministers who had never received episcopal ordination owing to secular or ecclesiastical persecution. They even enjoyed appointment within the Anglican Church. Bishop Andrewes, that staunchest upholder of the episcopate, in a discussion of the validity of the ministry of Reformed theologians and ministers said :

> Nevertheless, if our form be of divine right, it doth not follow from thence that there is no salvation without it, or that a church cannot consist without it. He is blind who does not see churches consisting without it . . . To prefer a better is not to condemn a thing. Nor is it to condemn your church if we recall it to another form, namely our own, which the better agrees with all antiquity (*Opuscula*, p. 191).

As Bramhall expressed it in the same discussion, " we unchurch none at all ". Downham argued in a sermon of 1608:

> . . . although we be well assured that the form of government by bishops is the best, as having not only the warrant of Scripture for the first institution, but also the perpetual practice of the Church from the apostles' time to our age for the continuance ; notwithstanding we doubt not, but where this may not be had, others may be admitted ; neither do we deny but that silver is good, though gold be better.

Bridges averred that such differences are " not directly material to salvation, neither ought to break the bond of peace and Christian concord. But they may think and wish well to us, and we in the name of the Lord think well and wish good luck to them ". And Hall, justifying episcopal rule in relation to its rejection by foreign Reformed churches, said :

> Every church, therefore, which is capable of this form of government, both may and ought to affect it, as that which is with so much authority derived from the apostles to the whole body of the Church upon earth ; but those particular churches to whom this power and faculty is denied, lose nothing of the true essence of a church, though they miss something of their glory and perfection, whereof they are barred by the necessity of their condition (*Works*, X, p. 282).

And he goes on to show that all this happened of necessity and compul-

sion and they did what they did " to sow the seeds of the Gospel ". Bramhall thought of popish episcopacy as the abuse of episcopacy. He did not consider episcopacy as of the *esse* of a church, not even its *bene esse* or *plene esse* : to him it was just a very safe way : " *via tutissima* ".

All this means that there was reciprocal communion between the Anglican Church and the other Reformed churches and the interchangeability of their ministries up to the Act of Uniformity. In modern words this is intercommunion. The efforts of the secular and church leaders in Stuart days to force all the inhabitants of these shores into ecclesiastical and liturgical uniformity caused great suffering and destroyed the unity in the spirit so wondrously secured by their fathers. Thousands were fined, imprisoned, and ruined for breaches of petty ecclesiastical bye-laws. Ears were cut off, noses slit. A man could get three months imprisonment for using any form other than the prescribed one, six months for the second offence, and transportation for the third. The elderly Baxter rotted in gaol, and, in 1662, two thousand of our best clergymen in England (not to estimate their lay followers) were driven out of their own Church into nonconformity by the Act of Uniformity. Since 1662 our Church has insisted on episcopal ordination for all clergy who hold any office, and only men so ordained may preach the Word and administer the sacraments. But this is not to deny that men chosen in other ways are not lawfully called nor their ministry valid. This would be false to our history when for a century non-episcopally ordained ministers held dignities in the Anglican Church, and false to our hard won theology.

The *via media*, struck by Anglicanism, had more of genius in it than compromise. Fuller, that great protagonist of the *via media* and unity of the Church, finds its essence in the distinguishing between fundamental and minor issues, between essential doctrine and matters of polity. We have always sought to balance those two seemingly irreconcilable forces in what will always be a community of differences : first the drive of the organized Church with its concern for unity and uniformity, and with that the right and responsibility of the individual believer to be a pilgrim. Anglicanism in the period we have been discussing achieved that degree of balance possibly as stable as at any time and place in Christendom.

A compulsive uniformity fathered nonconformity and fractured the unity of the Spirit. It is high time we thought out again the theological implications of the Reformation and so of Anglicanism. The late Norman Sykes in his fine work *Old Priest and New Presbyter* (to which the writer is indebted) wrote of the *via media* of Anglicanism, affirming

> the maintenance of episcopacy by the Church of England as part of a continuity with the early and medieval church, its acceptance on the ground of historic continuance since the apostolic age, its requirement for ministering within its own communion, and its restoration to those churches which have lost it, as a condition of reunion, without asserting their non-episcopal ministries and sacraments to be invalid because of its loss (p. 261).

Intercommunion is no great advance. It would be merely a harvesting of reclaimed land.