

# 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](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php)

## Editorial

THE appearance of the Interim Statement, entitled *Towards Reconciliation*, of the Anglican-Methodist Unity Commission has evoked a response of disappointment from many quarters. It is in fact little more than a rehash of the 1963 Report, seasoned here and there with a more positive statement of the evangelical viewpoint, the effect of which is to emphasize more than ever the ambiguities and contradictions of the situation that the Statement seeks to commend. Yet we are assured that "all the judgments expressed here . . . are those of the whole commission" (p. 2). It comes to us, accordingly, with no note of dissent from either Anglican or Methodist. This is surprising for a number of reasons, but not least because the most significant feature of the 1963 Report was the Dissentient View appended to it and bearing the names of four distinguished Methodist scholars who had participated as representatives of their church in the conversations that led to the Report (and none of whose names appear in the membership of the present Commission—there may be good reasons for this, but it would be interesting to know what they are). There are indications that some attempt was made to take their objections into consideration, but in the main the important issues over which they voiced their objections remain unaltered, the questions namely, of Scripture and tradition, episcopacy, ordination, priesthood, and sacraments.

On the subject of Scripture and tradition, for example, the Interim Statement contains the following excellent declaration :

Tradition, however, high and holy, can never stand by itself. The words of the 'Dissentient View' may here be echoed : 'All Christians have much to learn from the past, but it is their perpetual obligation to bring their inherited customs, institutions, and traditions to the bar of Scripture, by which Christ rules his Church'. The products of the traditionary process must be tested by the Scriptures to which they claim to be subservient, and wherever they are found deficient they must be reformed. (p. 8)

This corresponds in effect to the assertion of the 1963 Report that "the formulation of the canon is a sufficient sign that the early Church intended to distinguish between the apostolic tradition and all later tradition, and to insist that the apostolic tradition as witness to the work of God in Christ should be the norm for all other tradition" (p. 17). At the same time, however, the Interim Statement reaffirms the position defined in the 1963 Report in these words :

Because tradition, in the sense of the traditionary process, springs from the constant work of the Holy Spirit guiding the Church into all the truth, as it is in Jesus and as the Scriptures set it forth, tradition is indeed 'holy' and to be 'treated with affection and reverence'. (p. 7)

Of the expressions in quotation marks (taken from the 1963 Report) the latter is a distinct echo of the language of the Council of Trent in one of the most controversial of its formulations. Moreover, it is extremely dangerous to speak facetiously of "the constant work of the

Holy Spirit guiding the Church into all the truth". Our Lord's promise that the Holy Spirit would guide into all truth was given specifically *to the apostles* and only to the Church in general through and on the basis of their teaching (which is fully authoritative precisely because it is essentially the reproduction of *His* teaching); and it had its concrete fulfilment in the writings of the New Testament, universally acknowledged by the Church to be the *canon*, the normative rule of faith, to which all other and subsequent teaching must conform before it can be approved as authentically Christian. Concepts of the Church as the extension of the incarnation, bishops as the extension of the apostolate, and tradition as the extension of the canon lead with an inevitability of logic, as has been the case with the papal system, to authoritarian pretensions regarding the infallibility of the Church's teaching office and episcopal indefectibility.

The very high doctrine of the divine inspiration of Holy Scripture, which is characteristic not only of the formularies of historic Anglicanism, but also of the Church universal in the post-apostolic centuries, is now sanctioned as but one of a number of options varying from belief in the dogmatic inerrancy of the Bible to the belief that,

since Biblical criticism has disclosed so many possibilities of error in the recording and transmission of Israelite history, prophetic and apostolic teaching, and the words and deeds of Jesus himself, the Church cannot legitimately require belief in more than a limited number of facts held to be basic to God's revelation. (p. 10)

The various views, in all their modifications, are accepted as a reflection of the "scene of tensions, even of conflicts", over this subject in the churches today, indeed of "the present world-wide turmoil in theological thinking and Biblical scholarship". However pious may be the hope for the ultimate "emergence in the united Church of a deeper and wider agreement on the nature of Scripture and tradition", the desire to make room for theological turmoil and opinions that are in conflict with each other indicates a serious departure from the doctrine of Scripture defined in the teaching of Christ and His apostles and an insecure foundation for the construction of a united church. Nonetheless, the admonition is given that

there can be no question of the exclusion of any of the views outlined above from the life of our Churches at any stage in the present scheme. (p. 10)

The Interim Report displays the same accommodating attitude towards the current confusion over the doctrine of priesthood and ministry. The whole spectrum of the ecclesiastical rainbow, ranging from sacerdotal ultra-violet to evangelical infra-red, is accorded the accolade of "recognized tension" and "recognized liberty". Doctrinal contradictions and incompatibilities are apparently regarded as assets rather than obstacles to reunion. The bewildered Methodist must wonder what answer he is expected to give to the RSVP of the formal invitation he has received to unite with the Church of England, confronted as he is with Anglicans on the one hand who hold that episcopacy is optional rather than essential and affirm the full validity of the orders and sacraments of his church, and, on the other hand, with Anglicans who maintain that ordination by the laying on of the

hands of bishops in the historic succession conveys a unique and indelible priestly character that qualifies its recipients to exercise a valid ministry as mediators of grace by means of sacrament and absolution, and who accordingly discountenance the orders and sacraments of his church as defective and subnormal and therefore at best doubtful in their efficacy. He will surely be excused for concluding that, if episcopacy is of the *essè* of the Church, it can hardly be of the *bene esse*!

The crux of the whole matter continues to be the Service of Reconciliation in which it is proposed to effect the unification of Anglican and Methodist ministries, for it is here that these questions most insistently cry out for an answer. But the Commission has resolutely set its face against the provision of an answer. Its members, it seems, have been happy to cast themselves in the role of apostles of equivocation.

Individual participants in the Service (they say) may be expected to bring to it diverse and opposing views of its significance for Methodist ministers. If some see the Service as conditional or unconditional ordination of Methodist ministers to a priesthood not hitherto exercised, others in both Churches are sure it is no such thing . . . . And if either a 'catholic' or an 'evangelical' understanding of the Service appears to be taken, even implicitly, as the norm, many at the opposite extreme will feel that their own convictions about priesthood would be compromised if they took part in it. . . . So, if the Service is not to be intolerable for some, neither Church must officially define its significance for Methodist ministers in any other way than by saying that it will create conditions under which all Anglicans can conscientiously recognize them as 'priests in the Church of God' in whatever sense they give this phrase. (p. 15)

The reason given in the 1963 Report for "the strictest invariability of episcopal ordination" as basic to the Commission's proposals is repeated, namely, that, "while it is possible to hold a 'low' view of episcopacy within a strict invariability of practice, it becomes impossible to hold a 'high' view where this invariability is broken". It is emphasized, further, that the acceptance of this rule will not commit anybody to the view that the historic episcopate is essential to the apostolic character of the Church, or that this character is necessarily something which non-episcopal churches necessarily lack, or that the grace of God flows into the Church only through the channel of the historic episcopate, or that membership of an episcopally ordered church is a necessary condition of salvation. The rule is seen, rather, as a safeguard against the creation of divisions between Anglicans in the process of bringing the two churches together (p. 16).

It has rightly been asked, however, whether the procedure proposed is not likely to prove more divisive than unitive. An assumption central to the Service of Reconciliation is that both Methodist and Anglican ministries have something of importance to communicate which the other lacks. But just what this is remains studiously undefined. "We pray," the Commission explains, "that what the one ministry has received from God will be given to, and received by, the other"; but as there is no sort of agreement as to exactly what the *desideratum* in each case might be "the issue is deliberately placed

in God's hands" (p. 28). This, if the expression may be excused, seems very much like passing the buck to the Deity! And in any case who really believes that there is any substance to this sentiment that each can convey to the other something that is lacking excepting the extreme "high" churchman who is convinced that the great lack of Methodism is that of a valid priestly ministry which Anglicanism can provide through the laying on of episcopal hands? This would certainly seem to be implied in the terminological distinction between Anglican "priests" and Methodist "ministers" (see, for example, pp. 3, 31), and especially in the Service of Reconciliation itself where the prayer is offered, with reference to the Methodist "ministers": "Pour upon them Thy Holy Spirit to endue each, according to his need, with grace for the office and work of a Priest in thy Church", and in the bishop's declaration, after laying his hands on all of them: "Take authority for the office and work of a Priest"; whereas in the corresponding action, with reference to the "priests" of the Church of England, in each instance the word "Minister" is substituted for the word "Priest" (pp. 41, 44).

Moreover, this implication is confirmed by the noticeable failure of the Commission to apply in the first fifty pages of their Interim Statement the wisdom in accordance with which the title of "presbyter," is strongly advocated as preferable to that of "priest" for use in the Draft Ordinal, the text of which occupies the later pages of this Interim Statement and which would become operative at the second stage, that, namely, of the organic union of the two churches. The following reasons are given for preferring the term "presbyter":

First, it is the most ancient of the titles used for this order of ministry and is the one used in both Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic forms of ordination as well as in the Ordinal of the Church of South India, so that it seems appropriate, as we look forward to the growing unity of Christendom, that we should adopt a word which has behind it such a weight of ecumenical and Catholic usage.

Second, it must be realized that the word 'priest' has for many Protestants overtones of meaning which would be repudiated by Catholic theologians, but which, nevertheless, suggest to many people the mediatorial intrusion of another man between a Christian and his God. The word 'presbyter' has a stronger backing of Catholic usage, and yet is free from these overtones, and therefore offers the possibility of being a word of reconciliation where 'priest' would be one of division. (pp. 52f.)

This is compelling logic! Why, then, has it not been applied in the earlier part of this Statement? What justification is there for disregarding this wisdom in the formulation of the first stage of unification? Here, at least, the members of the Commission show a remarkable lapse in consistency—or in frankness.

As this Interim Statement differs in no substantial respect from the 1963 Report of which it is intended to be a revision and clarification, it is impossible to suppose that the objections voiced by the dissentients to the 1963 Report have been removed. The judgment of these same dissentients that the proper unity of the Church is not to be found in a scheme which, though well-intentioned, is in principle sectarian and exclusive, and would in practice lead to certain division in the Metho-

dist Church, and could conceivably lead to division in the Church of England also, (1963 Report, p. 57)

has been corroborated by the reaction, by both "high" and "low" churchmen as well as Methodists, to the publication of the Interim Statement. For example, an Anglo-Catholic layman, who is a City businessman, churchwarden, treasurer, and patron into the bargain, has made the following trenchant comment :

No City auditor would pass a balance-sheet concocted by trading from memorandum and articles deliberately so ambiguous that directors interpreted them as they please. . . . The Commission's muddle-headed approach has aroused so much opposition that the scheme could not go through without rending the C of E apart, while aggrieved Methodists have said that they will found a new Church if faced with spurious unity. So the project must founder.

And the Master of the Society of the Holy Cross has expressed the views of this group in these terms :

There is little in the Interim Statement to quieten our misgivings about the whole proposal. . . . We have always said that there can be no true unity unless it is on a basis of faith. The principles which are essential in such an agreement were set out in the Profession of Faith which was issued by the synod of the Society of the Holy Cross last year. Copies of this document have been signed by some ten thousand of the faithful, including at least some bishops. In this profession we affirmed what Catholics must regard as essential—and it would appear that the members of the Commission are still content to resort to compromise and ambiguity in their professed purpose to create a new Church. . . . The time for plain speaking is at hand, and we must say, without any hesitation, that we cannot take part in (a) the Service of Reconciliation or (b) the scheme for organic union of the Church of England with the Methodist communion.

A Methodist spokesman has explained the reason for opposition to the scheme in his own denomination as follows :

We Methodists who dissent from the majority report of 1963 are emphatically not 'campaigning against reunion with the Church of England'. Neither the militant 'Voice of Methodism Association', nor the conservative evangelical 'Methodist Revival Fellowship', nor yet the 'National Liaison Committee' (which forms a link between these two bodies and many other Methodist dissenters) has ever been 'against reunion'. What we are so strongly opposed to is the present scheme for reunion, as partly outlined in the 1963 Report and recently clarified in '*Towards Reconciliation*'. . . . We oppose the 1963 scheme on the chief ground that, despite what it says about the relation between scripture and tradition, it proposes the 'strictest invariability' of an element of church order in which scripture is subordinated to tradition. In a word, we believe the scheme to be unscriptural and therefore unacceptable.<sup>1</sup>

Finally, we quote from the Statement which was produced by the National Evangelical Anglican Congress held at the University of Keele in April of this year :

The Revised Service of Reconciliation contains many excellent features, but the mutual laying on of hands presents us with the same difficulties

<sup>1</sup> These three quotations are from letters to the Editor of the *Church Times* which appeared in the issues of 14 April, 31 March, and 21 April respectively.

as it did in the 1963 Service. We recognize the difficulty which it is intended to solve. . . . Nonetheless, we find the ceremony needless, misleading, and a cause of offence. Despite all disclaimers, it has the effect of calling in question the status of Methodist ministers which to us is beyond question. . . . While we suspend decision till the final report, at this stage few of the clergy among us would feel able to commit themselves to take part in the Service of Reconciliation.

It is true, of course, that there are a great many in both churches to whom the proposed scheme is acceptable and even welcome, and also that, as the Interim Statement contains no dissentient word, presumably it represents the common mind of all the members of the Commission, both Anglican and Methodist. But the whole point is that, however much agreement it may evoke, the plan for unification as it is now proposed is unacceptable to large numbers of Anglicans and Methodists (as the quotations given above plainly indicate), with the consequence that instead of being unitive it will in fact prove divisive and in the end we shall find ourselves with more churches on our hands than we started with. In other words, this is definitely not the way in which to realize the admirably stated aim which the Commission set before itself, namely,

with ever greater urgency to further the mission of the Church, overseas as well as at home, by the deepening of our unity : to serve our nation as one servant Church, to teach the people of our nation with one Christian doctrine, and with one voice to present to the world our crucified and risen Saviour. (p. 5)

\* \* \* \*

With the publication of this issue I bring to a conclusion my duties as Editor of *The Churchman* and hand over the reins of office to Mr. Gervase E. Duffield who is well known for his abilities in the journalistic and publishing fields and as an energetic member of the House of Laity in the Church Assembly. I have enjoyed and valued my eight-and-a-half years in the editorial chair and I am particularly grateful for the loyalty and co-operation of the considerable number of scholars who have generously given of their time and talents to maintain the reputation of *The Churchman* as a serious theological journal. And I express my appreciation to our readers in many different parts of the world for the encouragement which they have unfailingly given. I have no doubt that *The Churchman* will continue to have an important part to play as an organ of responsible evangelical thought in the years that lie ahead.

PHILIP EDGCUMBE HUGHES.