Editorial

OBERLIN AND THE NATURE OF THE UNITY WE SEEK

THE ecumenical movement has become a fact of unquestioned significance in the life of contemporary Christendom. The history of the past half-century has been punctuated by important conferences, each of which has made its contribution to the development of the movement. It is still too early to predict what place the recent gathering at Oberlin will assume in the on-going process of ecumenical advance. It was a conference organized on a regional, not on a world-wide, basis. Consequently it was imperfectly representative of the ecclesiastical spectrum. But it arose out of, and was related to, the life of a strong and important segment of Christendom. In North America it is perhaps more difficult than elsewhere to bridge the gap between the ecumenical and the local. Yet the size, vigour, vitality and diversity which characterize American churches make it a matter of urgent importance that the ecumenical movement should be more than the hobby of a select circle of specialists. The final assessment of the value of the conference will be largely determined by the measure in which it contributed to the solution of this problem.

A preliminary judgment suggests that to an important degree the conference represented a "break-through" at least to the middle stratum of American church leadership. Oberlin was fortunate in having the participation of many of the men and women who are most active in the ecumenical movement and best informed about its concerns, but these by no means constituted the bulk of the membership. Many of those present had never shared in an international gathering; it is safe to assume that many of them never will. This is no reflection on their capacity; it is simply a consequence of the scale on which American life is organized. It comes as a shock to Canadians to realize that in the United States there are nearly a thousand executive secretaries of church councils (local, state, or regional). Denominational officials represent a great host; so do professors in colleges and seminaries. These were the people who came to Oberlin. The confusion which at the outset prevailed in some of the sections was probably a reflection of the fact that to many of the participants the experience was novel and the methods new.

Confusion may have been an initial problem but it was not the final characteristic of the conference. With surprising rapidity the members of the section broke through to a genuine ecumenical encounter. The frustrating phase was briefer and less stultifying than might have been expected. Various explanations of this fact can be advanced: the diversities of American church life mean that most people have had to associate with fellow Christians of other traditions; co-operative enterprises have fostered habits of

adjustment. But by themselves these are scarcely sufficient. Throughout the conference, the conviction grew that though an "ecumenical mind" has not yet emerged, an "ecumenical temper" is already a reality. Christians have learned to approach each other in a humbler and less aggressive frame of mind than was formerly the case.

A co-operative spirit is an important asset; by itself it cannot guarantee the success of a conference. Oberlin was notable because of the quality and character of the preparatory work which preceded it. Local study groups had been established in all parts of the continent. For months they had been studying the issues with which the conference was concerned. The papers presented to these groups had been widely circulated. Everyone who came to Oberlin had already participated in a process of intensive discussion. It would be rash to assume that everyone had benefited to the fullest extent from this opportunity; doubtless many of the essays were filed away unread, but it is clear that the quality of many of the conference reports was the direct result of an educational programme of unique intensity. As a demonstration of what can be achieved in this respect, Oberlin was an impressive object lesson. Its values should be conserved; perhaps they will be, since on few points was the conference more unanimous than in requesting that a continuing programme of studies be initiated, comparable in scope and intensity with the work done in preparation for Oberlin.

The value of these preliminary studies was proved not merely by the spirit in which the delegates approached their task, but by the clarity with which it was set before them. The purpose of the conference was to study "the nature of the unity we seek." Few subjects have been left so largely to the mercy of vague enthusiasm; in few was the need of more precise definition so urgent. Unity was considered in three major areas. The first was concerned with our beliefs and convictions, the second with our corporate life and organization, the third with our witness amid the social and cultural complexities of our society. Each of these divisions comprised four sections. A wide range of subject matter was set forth in a way which encouraged intensive consideration. It also afforded full scope to a wide variety of gifts; both theologians and administrators had ample opportunity to share their experience and to gain new insights into the needs and opportunities of our day.

The churches, of course, did not send their representatives to Oberlin merely to provide them with the opportunity of participating in stimulating debate. They obviously hoped for results. Were any forthcoming? In some quarters extravagant expectations were entertained: it was assumed that a conference on unity would produce specific plans for union. That was not its function; even if the objective had been feasible, it would have been beyond the reach of so large a body, meeting for so short a time. Oberlin was a "study conference," and the immediate results of any educational process cannot be quickly or accurately assessed. Its aim was as much to define objectives as to achieve them. After all, people are more likely to reach their

goal if they know what it is. Nor should we forget the importance of many results which are no less real because they are intangible. The achievement of unity depends on understanding as much as it does on programmes. An atmosphere of charity and mutual appreciation, a mood of hope and expectancy—these are vital to any progress toward unity, and they are the direct result of such knowledge one of another as Oberlin was able to encourage.

This is the kind of faint and nebulous praise which has damned many a well-intentioned conference. Did Oberlin achieve nothing more than the glow of vague good-will which is often the sole deposit of the gathering together of Christians? There is no denying the dangers which beset ecumenical gatherings. It is perilously easy for the initiates to repeat an intricate but familiar series of manoeuvres. Points of agreement and of disagreement are set forth in ways already familiar to the experts, but no appreciable progress is achieved in any direction. Did Oberlin do any better? The answer will doubtless vary according to the section or division with which participants were primarily familiar. In some cases nothing emerged beyond a clearer definition of problems and a sharper delimitation of the areas within which solutions might be found. Such limited progress is by no means negligible and need not be dismissed with impatience or contempt. But far more than this is needed if the ecumenical movement is to justify the hopes it has aroused. The major achievement of Oberlin was to point to new and promising avenues of advance. Even the differences which divide the churches were "redefined in novel and stimulating ways." The imperatives of the Gospel—the constraints which arise from our common faith and which make us ashamed of our divided state—were set forth with a clarity which can be attributed to the pervasive influence of Biblical theology. But the exciting feature of the conference was the way in which it pointed toward a fresh approach to problems "which in the past have often proved their power to keep Christians apart." This was particularly true of the sacraments. Baptism has hitherto played a subsidiary part in ecumenical discussions. At Oberlin we discovered that many easy assumptions required re-examination, but that when the problem was seen in a new perspective it opened up intriguing prospects of closer understanding. The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper is so stubborn a source of division that there might seem to be little hope of discovering an untried way that would lead us forward. We have so often deplored our separation at the Lord's Table—our point of deepest division, the source of most the flagrant scandal in Christendom—that there seemed little else that we could do. Oberlin did not offer a solution, but it did set the question in a slightly different context, and indicated ways in which this intractable problem might finally be solved. Much remains to be done, but a conference which can suggest a new and promising approach to such difficulties has deserved well of the churches.

In the specifically theological field, Oberlin may therefore prove to be a milestone of some significance. Both in achievement and in promise, it went

far beyond many previous conferences. It was able to build, of course, on the results of their labours. In its own turn it will contribute in a wide variety of ways to the creation of that atmosphere of respect and confidence in which alone true unity can develop. It re-emphasized the elementary fact which we forget to our peril—that in our divided state we are not meeting the demands of our age. And in simple propositions it set before the churches certain elementary truths which must always govern our search for closer relations and deeper fellowship: unity belongs to the essential nature of the church; this unity must be made visible to the world in a greater measure than that in which the corporate life of our churches now manifests it; and it must provide freedom for an extensive measure of diversity.

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