Denominational Loyalty and Loyalty to Christ: The Problem a Century Ago and Today

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In 1843 the newly separated Free Church of Scotland issued a call for unity among all Evangelical Christians. The Swiss Pastoral Society followed suit in 1845, declaring it to be highly desirable for all who believed in the fundamental truths of the gospel to unite in an "oecumenical Confession." That confession was to be professedly opposed to the "unity, purely material, of the Romish Church," a demonstration of that unity of hearts which needed no iron discipline to maintain it – which, in fact, was a unity in the Spirit, not a unity forged by man.[1] The participants were to profess their faith in the redeeming Christ, and the "oecumenical Confession" was to be purely the occasion of that act of faith.

A pilot conference was held in Edinburgh under the auspices of the Free Kirk. At this meeting the Germans were represented by Schmucker and the Swedes by George Scott, the English Methodist secretary of the Swedish Missionary Society. Soon after the conference other continental Protestants joined the movement, and it was widely believed that the majority of the German theologians were favourable to "Evangelical Union."[2]

The number of Anglicans involved in the movement at its inception can be calculated with approximate accuracy from the list supplied in the report of the second conference, which took place in London in 1846. Admittedly, there were quite a number of people present who refused to be considered, for that occasion, "in any other light than as Members of the Catholic or Universal Church of Christ," and who therefore appear in the list without further qualification. Some of these might have been communicating Anglicans, but the general conduct of Anglicans at the conferences makes it seem unlikely that many of these "Catholic Christians" came from the National Church. We may therefore compute that, of about 1,000 present at the second conference, some 150, or just over a tenth, were Anglican.[3]

This substantial contingent may be broken down into distinct groups. A number were "English" proprietary-chapel Evangelicals from Scotland, then

1. *Lectures on Foreign Churches, delivered in Edinburgh and Glasgow, May, 1845, in connection with the objects of the Committee of the Free Church of Scotland on the State of Christian Churches on the Continent and in the East* (Edinburgh: W. P. Kennedy, 1845), pp. 25–27.

2. Cf. Sir Culling Eardley (formerly Smith), *The Testimony to Christian Union of Australia, France, and Germany, in January 1859* (London: Nisbet, 1859), p. 7.

3. Cf. *Report of the Proceedings of the Conference, held at Freemasons' Hall, London, from August 19th to September 2nd inclusive, 1846* (London: Partridge and Oakey, 1847), appendix.

in the thick of a running battle with the Scottish Episcopalian hierarchy and virtually excommunicated by both the Scottish and the English bishops. Another group came from Merseyside, and it was this group which contained some of the most striking members of the Anglican contingent, W. W. Ewbank, Vicar of Everton, and Thomas Byrth, Rector of Wallasey, being the chief. Quite a number came from the Low Church section of the Church of Ireland. Finally, there were powerful individuals like Baptist Noel, Edward Bickersteth, and Sir Culling Eardley. Eardley, the president of the Conference, was then in open revolt against his Bishop (Phillpotts of Exeter) and worshipping with Dissenters at Torquay, though still protesting his loyalty to the Church of England: Noel was shortly to secede to the Baptists over the Gorham Judgment. Also present, though taking no active part, was the Reverend James Shore, who was running a chapel-of-ease at Bridgetown in defiance of his vicar and the Bishop of Exeter, and who was to become, unwittingly, the nucleus for the "Free Church of England."

With the possible exception of the visitors from Ireland, these men can scarcely be regarded as representative of the Anglican Church. Their unrepresentativeness was emphasized by the type of Anglican churches in London made available to the visiting clergy: for the most part, small proprietary chapels – Carlisle; Gray's Inn Lane; Pentonville; St. John's, Bedford Row; Trinity, Conduit Street; West Street – chapels which had been known, if anything, for disregard, if not actual defiance, of episcopal authority.[4]

Yet these superficial characteristics could not prepare us for the considerable qualms of conscience which assailed many of the Anglicans during that conference.

A difficulty was present almost from the beginning. What was the Alliance? Was it a church? Was it an organ of expression at all? If not, what could it usefully do, once having assembled? Could it draw up a form of subscription as a basis of membership, or was it to be open to anyone who chose to claim Evangelical faith? Anglican members were quick to resist any corporate conception of the conference and any test of membership. Eardley, in union with the Presbyterian, Symington, insisted that at all costs the Alliance must not be idolized. His position was made clearer later in reply to a complaint from the Bishop of Adelaide that the Alliance had expressed "a sense of want without satisfying the craving," when he argued that the unity sought by the Alliance, in obedience to Christ's High-Priestly Prayer, was the unity, not of churches, but of individual believers. It is fairly clear that Eardley, like Baptist Noel, believed that the church was visible anyhow only in a conventional or "transferred" sense, in that members of the invisible church did in fact meet together for worship.[5] But if this removed any possibility of ambiguity from the conference for Eardley and Noel (and the proceedings suggest that it did not always do so for Noel), it is clear that not all Anglicans involved in the conference were so happily situated. Ewbank and Bickersteth might differ

4. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 155.
5. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 161, 207; Eardley, *The Testimony to Christian Union*, p. 11.

over the scriptural character of the word "body" in the proposed article of membership which related to the resurrection of the body, and Ewbank and Byrth might not see eye to eye entirely on the subject of private judgment; but most of the Anglicans (and certainly all the leading ones) appear to have been united in resisting the assumption, prevalent among the non-Anglicans, that so long as they were united against "popery" it did not much matter on what terms.

A glance at reactions to the original proposal of an Alliance will make the reason clear. Hugh McNeile of St. Jude's, Liverpool, had at first regarded the proposal as useless because it seemed that its only possible basis was opposition to "popery" as an abstraction which was often extended by Dissenters to embrace the Church of England under certain aspects. In the event, he joined the Alliance because of an overwhelming desire to bear witness to the spirit of reconciliation. Byrth, doubting whether the time was ripe for the sort of unity which was needed, discussed the matter at length with J. J. Cordeaux and others in the Merseyside group before he committed himself. He, too, distrusted the tendency to use the Alliance as a stick for beating popery. As Ewbank wrote later: "He earnestly believed that our Church, with all her faults, had not her like on the face of the earth; and in joining the Evangelical Alliance, he did not give up one particle of his churchmanship. . . ." In a published declaration Byrth, Cordeaux, Ewbank, and three other members of the Liverpool section of the Alliance declared that their membership did not mean a surrender of their right to defend the Church of England, the "most excellent system of church polity at present existing." The priority which drove these men into the Alliance was simply their membership of "Christ's Catholic Church," the community of all believers. Seeing other believers associated in witness, they could do not less than demonstrate their common calling; but it did not follow that they surrendered their rational judgment that the visible ordering of the church was best shown forth in their own communion.[6]

In an effort to steer the conference clear of the fatal issue of anti-popery, the Anglican members, not without misgivings, strove to elicit some form of confession. Bickersteth tried to get a set of nine doctrinal articles accepted. These were taken up for discussion, but he could not persuade the conference to regard them as binding, even if approved. He and certain other Anglicans therefore concentrated on getting through the eighth article, on the divine institution of the ministry and the authority and perpetuity of the sacraments (an article very much less precise than the Thirty-Nine Articles were on these matters). However, their efforts came to grief in discussion, ironically enough over the old Anglican "argument from necessity," Ewbank being moved to confess that the church in a particular place could be justified in not having an episcopate if it was thought not "best for the interests of the Gospel." This shook the discussion, which subsequently disintegrated as various Anglicans

6. Cf. letter of W. W. Ewbank to G. A. Moncreiff, August 20, 1850, quoted in G. A. Moncreiff (ed.), *Remains of T. Byrth* (London: T. Hatchard, 1851), pp. 161–63; Eardley, *The Testimony to Christian Union*, p. 344.

made their personal concessions to a suspicious conference. Bickersteth, who in the first place had proposed the articles as "more or less vital to the Divine Word," clung to the eighth article on the ground that it was "the only fragment of the confession of a visible church"; but the greater part of the conference, suspicious of Anglican sacerdotalism, took advantage of the obvious differences in the Anglican camp over strategy and talked the article out. The most that Bickersteth could do was to persuade Eardley not to put the negative when a vote was taken. He apparently threatened that, if the negative were put, the Anglicans would withdraw from the conference. Even so, the Anglicans were greatly discomforted, and later saw their word "authority" replaced by "obligation" at the behest of Thomas Binney, the Congregationalist, Noel's arguments of indifference notwithstanding.[7]

The Anglicans had rallied, on the whole, to Bickersteth, because they had realized that, if the Alliance were to proclaim its rejection of the Romish teaching on orders and sacraments, it would be necessary for it to balance its negation with a positive Evangelical teaching. As might, perhaps, have been expected, this stand was misunderstood. One Baptist asked how Bickersteth could think the eighth article a defence against popery, when it was itself the purest popery in agreeing so much with Rome that it excluded the Quakers![8] Any hope that the negative outlook of the conference might be modified by Anglican participation was subsequently destroyed by the nation-wide reaction to the restoration of the Roman hierarchy in 1850, which gave rise to the "Explanatory Statement" read to the Exeter Hall meeting of February 27, 1851: "Differing as they may with regard to some of the grounds on which Popery should be resisted, and perhaps still more in reference to the modes in which that resistance should be carried on, they all concur in its condemnation as 'the mystery of iniquity.' "[9] It may be presumed that the Anglican members, of necessity, concurred in this statement. Indeed, the lay Anglicans took a major part in organizing public protest against the restored hierarchy, the Earl of Roden, for instance, admitting it to be his consuming passion.[10] Anglicans of the Evangelical school continued to cleave to the Alliance, however, for largely positive reasons. John Jordan, Vicar of Enstone, was typical in thinking that the Alliance's chief function was constantly to warn Christians against the danger of thinking that members of other churches were people with whom one had no common interests apart from a purely theoretical possibility of common membership in the invisible church. The Reverend S. A. Walker, of the Church of Ireland, had perhaps put his finger on the heart of the problem when he spoke of the cankerous wish not to think well of those in churches other than one's own. The consciousness that charity required more than an abstract lip-service to Evangelical unity in the invisible sphere

7. Cf. *Report of the Proceedings*, pp. 77f., 94, 118, 146, 172, 189, 192, 203. (Bickersteth confessed that he broached the whole matter "in weakness, and fear, and much trembling.")

8. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 137.

9. *Report of a Meeting convened by the Evangelical Alliance but open to all Christians holding the Doctrines of the Protestant Reformation, held in the Large Room, Exeter Hall, on Thursday, February 27, 1851* (London, 1851), p. 5.

10. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 246f.

was borne in upon the Anglicans in varying degrees and presumably through their experiences in the Alliance. When Cordeaux admitted to having failed to love his neighbour as he should, but confessed to no feeling of guilt for Christian division, Noel had to remind him that schism and lack of charity were synonymous.[11]

Charles de Rémusat, an intelligent Roman Catholic observer of the scene, was right to predict, in the *Revue des deux mondes* for January 1859, that the Church of England would never be represented in the Evangelical Alliance by more than a few interested individuals. A body in which it was so difficult to maintain a sense of positive affirmation and the need to embody one's sorrow for division and neglect, was not one in which churchmen with responsibility could easily feel at home. It was indeed desirable to witness to the existence of a deeper unity than that afforded by church organization; but since this was at the risk, in such an organization, of being taken for a "half-Churchman" or "two-thirds a Dissenter," it was not a witness which a whole church like the Church of England could in practice make.[12] Thomas Rawson Birks, as a "private" churchman, possibly found it something of a strain in such an atmosphere to maintain his deep sense, as an Anglican, of the "historical unity with the Church of early times," while agreeing as an anti-papist and anti-Tractarian with the predominant view in the Alliance that Romanism, both before and after the Reformation, was "Christianity only in name . . . , revived heathenism . . . , Judaism of self-righteous pride." For Birks membership in the Alliance was an existential necessity, a protest against the seemingly presumptuous claims of the Oxford Movement which appeared to "unchurch" half of Christendom at one fell swoop.[13] From that standpoint, the inevitable tensions within the Alliance were justifiable risks. But for the Church of England, and for some other churches *as* churches, full organized participation would have been at that time imprudent in the most spiritual sense – quite apart from the rightness or wrongness of Birks' estimate of Romanism – because the Alliance did not have the motivation or structure to take adequate account of dogma.

If we seek for the exact relevance to our present situation of this mid-nineteenth century Evangelical experience of ecumenics, we have to take account of the amazing transformation of the Christian scene since the second world war. The old categories of visible and invisible church, justification by faith alone and *ex opere operato*, even natural and supernatural, have been transformed almost beyond immediate recognition. Yet at the same time the importance of tradition, of solidarity in the People of God, the Body of Christ, has been immeasurably strengthened, and something like a consensus has emerged at the level of theology which, from certain aspects, while making

11. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 54–58, 227f., 353f.

12. This point was made by the Reverend C. J. Goodhart of Reading at the 1846 Conference. Cf. *Report of the Proceedings*, p. 21.

13. Cf. Birks' paper to the fifth annual conference of 1851, in E. Steane (ed.), *The Religious Condition of Christendom, exhibited in a series of papers prepared at the instance of the British Organization of the Evangelical Alliance* (London, 1852), pp. 138–41.

denominational standing perhaps less important than it was, strengthens the idea of dogmatics and makes possible a dialogue on the level of dogma between traditionally dogmatic bodies like the Roman and Eastern churches and traditions which have hitherto had an equivocal or negative attitude to dogma. Although it is possible for anyone to stand in the "catholic tradition," even if he deliberately stands aside from all traditions (one thinks of Charles Davis), the logic of the situation urges that, where possible, in the interests of coherent dialogue, some confessional loyalty should be observed. There is some uncertainty about the precise working out of this tension, especially in the youth section of the World Council of Churches,[14] but even the most impatient advocates of resolute and speedy action to realize our unity in Christ recognize the dogmatic necessity of coming to terms with the reality of the visible church and the delicate problems which that necessity raises for a family which is still divided theologically and psychologically.

In consequence, the problems which concerned Anglican Evangelicals in the Alliance are still with us, although in a different form. To paraphrase a private comment to the present writer by an official in the World Council of Churches, what was for the Alliance an experience of piety is for the modern ecumenist "ecumenical strategy." Yet the World Council is not the church catholic and no amount of ecumenical strategy can replace direct dialogue between the separated communities. It is true that much *ecclesiastical* life – parishes, church societies, church schools – is no longer at the heart of *ecclesial* life even within the separated communities, and it may be that the church exists in its most acute form for many individuals in transconfessional encounter. (Charles Davis recently reminded the Roman Catholic Church of this existential fact, which the organized church ignores at its peril.) Yet, as Rosemary Reuther said recently in a short but perceptive article,[15] some institution is necessary for the church's historical existence and, at least for some, the most mature ecumenism lies in remaining within their own traditions and communities, but with a new realization that the communities must *become* and not merely *claim to be* the sign of God's presence. For some the ecumenical vocation and their own integrity may demand a different course of action, and in taking that course they too choose to be a sign of God's presence and a standing rebuke to the faint-hearted and insincere. But, for the present writer at least, it is difficult to evisage a complete dissolution of the historic communities, short of a spiritual fusion or fertilization between them which is still a great way off.

14. See the articles published in *Risk*, 2, 4 (1966), under the general title "Confessional Loyalty at All Costs?"

15. Cf. Rosemary Ruether, "Post-Ecumenical Christianity," *The Ecumenist*, 5 (1966–67), 3–7.