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# CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE IN THE ANGLICAN-METHODIST CONVERSATIONS

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**T**HE Conversations between the Church of England and the Methodist Church, published last year, contain much that should be of very great interest to all Christians in these islands. THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY, which has always stood for Reformed ecumenicity, is interested in them chiefly for their bearing on the doctrines of grace. It is because the following paper—a composite study by an Anglican, a Methodist and a Baptist—examines the Conversations from this point of view that we are glad to publish it in this number, by courtesy of the T.S.F. Newsletter.

## INTRODUCTION

**H**ISTORICALLY and liturgically the Methodist Church stands nearer to the Church of England than do the other Free Churches. It is therefore natural that the first detailed plan for the union of the Churches in England should concern these two, and evangelical Christians within both of these Churches are hopeful that a closer union between the successors of Wesley and their cousins in the Church of England would contribute greatly to the spiritual good of the nation and of the Church, particularly as an influential (though probably dwindling) element in the Church of England looks more towards the unreformed Churches.

The Report which has been produced by representatives of the two Churches, and whose contents should be well known to the readers of this journal, raises matters of considerable importance and concern to all Christians. In the first place, there was a clear division of opinion among the Methodist contributors to the Report, the existence of which makes it all the more necessary to weigh very carefully the views put forward on both sides. A second and extremely important point is that there was no avowed conservative evangelical member in the teams of either Church, although certain representatives can gladly be recognized as not unsympathetic towards the conservative position. It must be plainly stated that in view of the very considerable conservative evangelical elements in both Churches, more particularly perhaps in the Church of England, the absence of any such representation

fic" (p. 23) shows plainly that "priest" in this context means *hiereus* and not *presbuteros*. Now although it is stated that in these actions "the ministerial priest acts representatively and in conjunction with the laity's exercise of its priesthood", the fact remains that the act of celebrating the Holy Communion is explicitly denied to laymen. But if laymen are allowed to minister the Word and baptism, why (subject to the safeguards that surround these two functions) may they not celebrate the Holy Communion? May we not ask for the Scriptural authority for this division of labour? Is it not true that here tradition has triumphed over Scripture? The position which is adopted here is one which is flatly intolerable to Churches which seek to be reformed according to the Word of God—and this of course includes evangelical Anglicans. Nor do evangelicals require a priest for "the formal pronouncing of absolution with the authority of the Church" (p. 23). The Lord Himself does that, and if on occasions a minister—or, for that matter, any other Christian—pronounces to me God's absolution he does so merely because it is helpful to my troubled conscience, and not because it is necessary for my forgiveness. If, therefore, "the celebration of the Holy Communion by laymen, whether on the ground of the priesthood of the laity or of special, *ad hoc*, authorisation by the Church, or both, is a grave problem for the Church of England" (p. 24; it would be more accurate to say 'for a section of the Church of England'), the Free Churchman must reply, "the preserving of 'priestly' functions for the ministry is a grave problem for me and my brethren." The issues at stake—the atonement, the present work of Christ, the competence of the human soul in the presence of God without the need for any merely human mediator—are too vital to be slurred over in the interests of an ecumenical merger.

### III. EPISCOPACY

Third, the doctrine of episcopacy which is laid down as the basis for unity is manifestly more than a mere method of Church government. In point of fact the basic elements in episcopal government are already to be found under different names, or under the actual name, in the various branches of the Methodist Church. Consequently, the demand that all future ordinations in the united Church be episcopal ordinations can only be regarded as having a doctrinal significance, so that the apostolic succession may be carried on. This point stands whether or not the Service of Reconciliation be regarded as conferring some kind of ordination. With regard to this service, Professor S. L. Greenslade, a member of the

Anglican team, has plainly written : "On the Anglican side there is a clear intention to impart to Methodist ministers whatever can be imparted through the laying-on of hands of bishops in apostolic succession" (*London Quarterly and Holborn Review*, July, 1963, p. 182). Doubtless if one believes that this "whatever" is empty of content, one may cheerfully submit to it, but it is hardly honest to do so.

Various questions may be asked about this concept of the historic episcopate which stands in the apostolic succession. Thus we might ask what is taught in Scripture about episcopacy. For all the high-sounding lip-service paid to the supremacy of Scripture (see above), there is not a hint of what it has to teach on this point. Might not the reason be that what is to be found in the New Testament about episcopacy would comport strangely with the present scene? Instead of Scriptural episcopacy we are presented with the historic episcopate as "the inalienable element in the Anglican inheritance" (p. 24) which the Church of England must bring into the united Church on the familiar ecumenical principle of agreement by conglomeration, each bringing his "riches" to the other.

We are told that episcopacy is "the form of government and ministry which God gave to his Church", it is "a special and greatly valued link with the episcopate of the primitive Church", "the normal and appointed means by which continuity of faith, office and authority has been maintained". These are mighty claims to make for an institution which, whatever its patristic provenance, *has no such apostolic sanction*. Are we really to believe that the apostolic mission of the Church is thus dependent upon a tactile succession? With whom is the Church of England connected by this tactile link? With the Free Churches who seek to reform themselves according to the Word of God in Holy Scripture, or with the unreformed Church of the Middle Ages? It is further claimed that a function of the episcopate is to guard the Church against erroneous teaching. Yet it needs to be said that in some dioceses it is left to others to guard the Church against episcopal heresies. Again, we are told that the bishop is meant to exercise pastoral care. But we are bound to ask whether the present-day Anglican bishop is not (through no fault of his own) much less able to do this than ministers in other denominations. The facts are that episcopacy is as much liable to fall into sin and heresy as any other kind of ministry and possesses no inalienable quality which may not be found in other forms of ministry. Writers so diverse and learned as J. B. Lightfoot, B. H. Streeter and E.

Schweizer are agreed that this kind of episcopacy based on apostolic succession and imparting a sacerdotal quality to the ministry of the Church is not to be found in Scripture. For an evangelical this is sufficient proof that it is not an indispensable condition to be imposed upon the Church of God.

#### IV. THE SACRAMENTS

Fourth, the Report contains a statement on the sacraments put forward by the Methodist in order to satisfy the Anglicans that there is a sufficient basis for agreement on these matters. It has to be admitted freely that we ourselves are not in full agreement on the question of baptism, but even from a paedo-baptist point of view the statement on baptism is not satisfactory. It fails to relate infant baptism closely to the scriptural doctrine of the covenant, and some confusion about the meaning of the word "regenerate" is evident. Once again, there is a lack of clear definition of terms.

The teaching regarding the Lord's Supper is also questionable. It is stated that in the Holy Communion the great salvation events culminating in the Cross are re-enacted in an act of corporate recollection which embraces not only the past but also the future(!). By contrast the New Testament teaches that the death of Jesus took place once and for all, and common sense tells us that remembrance is not re-enactment. Further, the "Church militant and the Church triumphant are present at the Eucharist"; it would be interesting to know what Scriptural authority there is for regarding the Church triumphant as being any more present at the Eucharist than at any other Church service. But the principal objection is that the Report states that the sacrament of Holy Communion is a sacrifice; Christ's finished work on the cross is represented and re-presented and renewed by our remembrance and communion. It needs to be re-asserted that, according to the New Testament, Christ's sacrifice is finished and complete; He does not make an eternal sacrifice, but is seated at the Father's right hand, having finished His sacrificial work and now making intercession for His people. There is no need to re-present His sacrifice, and there is not a word in the whole New Testament to suggest that anything of this kind needs to be or ought to be done at the Lord's Supper. Consequently, there is of course no need for the services of a human priest at the Supper.

#### V. THE SERVICE OF RECONCILIATION

Fifthly, the service of reconciliation must arouse considerable doubts in the minds of evangelicals. Essentially it is a liturgical

form of service, with no provision for any extempore elements (except for "any notices and biddings for prayer") or the preaching of the Word of God ; it embodies the Anglican and Methodist ordination services, and includes the laying on of hands by a bishop (in the historic episcopate) upon *all* Methodist ministers. Further, it is followed during Stage I by the consecration of Methodist bishops and by the invariable practice of episcopal ordination. In view of these circumstances it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that the intention of the service is to convey to Methodist ministers what they lack through not having been ordained by bishops standing in the so-called historical succession. Although the word "reordination" is perhaps a misnomer, and the idea of reordination has been expressly denied (H. Roberts, *Summary and Exposition of the Official Report*, p. 30), the whole character of the service suggests that some form of supplementary ordination is being conferred. Since Methodist ministers are ordained to "the office of a Minister in the *Church of Christ*" and Anglican priests are similarly ordained to "the Office and Work of a Priest in the *Church of God*", there is no reason for either to receive any supplementary ordination, especially one whose real purpose is that episcopal hands might be laid on Methodists. The Scriptural parallel to the present situation is surely to be found in Galatians 2 where the right hand of fellowship was used to bring together two "parties" in the Church of God.

#### CONCLUSION

In the light of this discussion, which has been conducted at the basic level of Christian doctrine, it is clear that the present scheme of Church unity offered to us is one to which evangelicals cannot subscribe, and that, in the event of its being accepted by the two Churches concerned, evangelicals would have to consider with the greatest seriousness the need for them to secede as a witness to the truth of God's Word in Holy Scripture. Here is a matter in which they cannot go against consciences which are captive to the Word of God. It is true that in the present Church of England (and, for that matter, in the Methodist Church) both low and high Churchmen can co-exist, and it might be argued that the proposed united Church would merely continue the present situation in which co-existence is a possibility. But it must be replied that the existing doctrinal standards of both Churches are Scriptural and evangelical, and can be conscientiously accepted by evangelicals, whereas the basis for unity in this proposed united Church is neither

Scriptural nor evangelical, and to accept it would be to war against the truth.

What, then, is the alternative that would be acceptable to evangelicals? We would suggest the following points:

1. Immediate recognition by Anglicans and Methodists of each other's ministry and membership, making possible immediate inter-communion both in participation and in celebration.

2. This could be preceded by "services of reconciliation" in which the significant feature would be the right hand of fellowship, and not the laying on of hands.

3. Although ministerial celebration of the sacraments would be normal and proper, the right of lay administration would be explicitly recognized.

4. The possibility of a merger between the Anglicans and the Methodists to be thoroughly explored, each Church being free to continue its own ways of worship without any uniformity being imposed from above.

5. Further exploration of the differences which divide the Free Churches, with particular attention to the problems of baptism and church government, with a view to deeper unity and union.

We believe that these points represent the direction which future proposals must follow. We freely recognize that there are some in the Church of England and elsewhere who cannot at present accept such proposals, belonging as they do to what the Report calls the "catholic" tradition. We have to tell them perfectly plainly and yet lovingly that we cannot contemplate unity with them until they reform themselves according to the Word of God. We profess our deep concern for the cause of Christian unity, but at the same time emphasize that unity cannot be at the expense of "the faith once delivered to the saints".