Contemporary Commentary

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BY THE REV. F. J. TAYLOR, M.A.

THE PROBLEM OF CHURCH RELATIONS.

THE outstanding feature of church life in the twentieth century has been the emergence of the Church in almost every known land. This development has been the result of a century and a half of world-wide missionary endeavour following upon the Evangelical Revival of the eighteenth century. Inevitably, problems have risen over the question of the relations of these various churches to one another. The pressure of a heathen environment in India or Africa has compelled Christians in those countries to realize their fundamental oneness over against a non-Christian way of life. What they share in common seems so much more important than their differences in outward organization, often, as they feel, imported from the West. A certain impatience with the niceties of ecclesiastical politics has been manifest in the younger Churches, although their links with the older sending Churches of the West have prevented the adoption of any hasty schemes of reunion.

Perhaps it is a sign of the lack of a realistic understanding of the modern world in which its life is set, that the Church in the West, and particularly in Britain, has been so little stirred by the crying need for an effective unity. It has now freely been admitted that not more than ten per cent. of the population of England recognizes the meaning and responsibilities of church membership. For the greater part of the population is indifferent to the claims of public worship or to the call for active service, yet there is little evidence of a determination to close the ranks and concentrate all available Christian resources on reclaiming the unchurched masses. Archbishop Temple, who proved himself a courageous protagonist of what has come to be called the oecumenical movement, gave expression in a sermon at the Edinburgh conference in 1937, to the sense of shame which ought to fill the minds of Christians as they contemplate the disunity of the Church. " A Church divided in its manifestation to the world cannot render its due service to God or to man, and for the impotence which our sin has brought upon the Church, through divisions in its outward aspect, we should be covered with shame and driven to repentance." The trouble is that while the leaders of the churches have been in personal touch with one another for a good many years through youthful membership in the Student Christian Movement, and have developed the technique of common consultation while respecting each other's convictions, the great majority of ordinary church members neither know nor care about those Christians whose church life is organized separately from theirs. The result is that in most urban districts there are several struggling causes which have little or

nothing to do with each other, in place of one or two vigorous centres of church life.

Most of these divisions have, of course, a long history, and a perverted sense of loyalty often tends to perpetuate them long after their original importance has been forgotten. Theological, social and economic factors are involved in this separation of Christians, and it is often hard to disentangle one factor from another. So far as the meetings of theologians are concerned, the chief obstacles to outward unity seem to be centred in the doctrine of the ministry and in certain assumptions about the Church. It can hardly be claimed that much progress has been made towards real unity since the Lambeth Appeal of 1920, while the temper of the Church of England has become less disposed to make concessions for the sake of the Christian good of England than it was after the first great war. A recent publication, edited by the Bishop of Oxford under the title *The Apostolic Ministry*, which seems designed to influence the deliberations of Lambeth, 1948, while presenting an uncompromising claim for episcopacy as the only apostolic ministry, appears to present an unworthy doctrine of the Church on account of its undue exaltation of the ministry.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, both in an address to the Methodists a year ago and in an historic sermon before the University of Cambridge in November, has shown himself resolved to carry forward the cause of Christian unity to which his great predecessor had made such signal contributions during thirty years of public life. The hour is certainly ripe for an effort to break the deadlock in which for so long proposals for reunion have been imprisoned. At the same time, all such efforts must be subjected to careful scrutiny lest they prove to be mere administrative devices which fail to grapple with the real problems. It is possible for the hurt of the daughter of my people to be healed too lightly. Secular attempts at promoting unity for administrative convenience may only too easily influence ecclesiastical designs. Reunion can never be more than a means to an end and cannot be purchased at the cost of infringing the essential apostolicity or holiness of the Church. The danger is that critics of reunion efforts will be too much removed from the burden of the daily life of the parishes and too keenly aware of possible dangers in any set of proposals.

The Archbishop suggested that the dislike of abandoning or merging traditional domestic habits had to bear a good deal of the responsibility for the maintenance of divided households in the family of God. It is for this reason, as well as on account of certain tensions in the Church of England itself, that there is little prospect of reunion being achieved by the drafting of constitutional schemes. The only possible way forward would be in the inauguration of a process of growing together until it becomes possible for Christians now separated to live together in one household.

"What we need," said the Archbishop, "is that while the folds remain distinct, there should be a movement towards a free and unfettered exchange of life in worship and sacrament between them, as there is already of prayer and thought and Christian fellowship—in short, that they should grow towards that full communion with one another, which already, in their separation, they have with

Christ." The way forward which he proposed in the sermon is by a mutual commissioning as between those Churches which agree (as many already do) upon the essential principles of the Church and the Scriptures, the Creeds, the two Sacraments and the Ministry as a gift of God through Christ to His Church. As a preliminary step, before any attempt at formal union, such Free Churches as are willing to do so, would " take episcopacy into their system and also be prepared to give their ministry to others who were willing to receive it." " If," asked the Archbishop, " the Free Churches accept the fact of episcopacy as a necessary feature of any reunited Church, why can they not accept it earlier as part of the process of assimilation and as a step towards full communion ? "

The Archbishop expressed the hope that " along the lines of recent Canadian proposals each communion, episcopal and non-episcopal, would contribute the whole of its separate ministry to so many of the ministers of the other as were willing to receive it." In Canada discussions have been going on between the United Church and the Church of England. A report has been put out for the consideration of the two Churches, suggesting a " procedure whereby our two ministries can be conferred each upon the other with a statement on the related question of a mutually recognized membership in each Communion." This seems to anticipate that ministers of each Church would be ordained according to the rites and ceremonies of the other, but without any suggestion that the previous ordination had been irregular or invalid. There appears to be some confusion here between commission and ordination.

Members of the Church of England and of the Free Churches are ordained to the ministry in the Universal Church of Christ, nor is this intention wholly obscured by the fact that the service of any minister is in practice limited to his own denomination. Any man who has once been ordained, whether by an episcopal or by a non-episcopal rite, as a minister in the Church of God, can never, without grievous unreality, submit to another ordination service. He can, of course, be commissioned to some particular task and receive an authority to supervise a certain area which he did not previously possess. The obvious analogy is the difference between ordination and institution to a particular cure of souls. Both (Anglican and Free Church) are ministries of the Word and Sacraments, and it is hard to see that the episcopal minister possesses any essential ministerial function which he is to bestow upon his non-episcopal brother in some form of re-ordination. The most that can be properly done is for each group to make provision for the solemn commissioning of members of the other group, to exercise authority in a wider sphere than previously. They may thus be given authority to exercise ministry in a denomination beyond their own. But this cannot be called a re-ordination, but a commissioning to wider service which involves the prior recognition of the validity of the respective ministries. Without that prior recognition, such sharing of each other's ministries would be a hollow mockery.

Now if the Archbishop intended to make such a clear recognition of the equal validity of non-episcopal ministries, then he will not carry

with him many members of his own Church. Judged by its formularies and its traditional practice, while claiming the Anglican order as sufficient for England, the Church of England has in the past felt itself to be in communion with the Churches of the Reformation in Europe. But to-day, it does not speak with one voice on this point. It is difficult to see how Free Churches could accept such re-ordination as is authorized in the Archbishop's sermon, if it was supposed that some essential ministerial quality, hitherto lacking, was conveyed by this method to the candidates. What is essential in any united Church is a ministry which enjoys public recognition in every part of the Church. It is commonly assumed that this will require a ministry of one form, the historic episcopate. But there seems no inherent necessity why the ministry should not exist in more than one form and yet be a genuine ministry of Word and Sacraments, recognized as such in all parts of the Church. It is unlikely that the Free Churches will be able to make a response to the Archbishop's proposals until it has been made clear what this mutual commissioning really involves and how far it is equivalent to re-ordination.

SOUTH INDIA AND REUNION.

THE tardy progress made by the scheme for reunion for South India has not been without gain if it has compelled a candid examination both of the detailed provisions of the scheme and of the theological assumptions which underlie them. In June, 1946, the Archbishop of Canterbury appointed a committee of theologians to consider the proposed Basis of Union and Constitution of the Church of South India. Without questioning the general character of the Scheme as approved by the Lambeth Conference of 1930, the Committee was to report on amendments considered necessary on theological or doctrinal grounds if the hope entertained by Lambeth, that ultimately the United Church would be in full communion with the Anglican Church, was to be fulfilled. Other amendments considered desirable in the interests of clarity and good expression were also to be put forward for consideration. Under the chairmanship of the Bishop of Derby, the committee possessed a non-evangelical majority.

Dr. L. S. Thornton desired to have put on record his judgment that the Scheme had deteriorated so seriously in its later forms that as it now stands he regards it as unacceptable. He believes this method of approach to the problem of Reunion to be a mistaken one, since all forms of Christianity at present existing are defective. What is needed, he suggests, is a period of further study, theological thinking and prayer in all Christian communions, until a recovered apprehension of the integrity and balance of Christian truth has been attained through a renewed understanding of the Scriptures and Christian antiquity. The need for such disciplined study and thought is evident to all considering churchmen, but to suggest that nothing should be done to deal with disunity until the theologians have begun all over again is a counsel of despair. Despite the revival in Biblical studies in the last twenty years, there are few signs that leading theologians have come to any significant agreement on the doctrines that divide

the churches. Indeed, the record of past history would suggest that not infrequently a time of theological revival is marked by a lack of theological unanimity.

One of the difficulties about a scheme which has been so long under consideration as the South India Scheme (since 1919), is that the circumstances surrounding its first beginnings change out of all recognition, and theological emphases do not remain the same. The report of the committee suggests that if the Scheme were still in its initial stage, it would have been desirable that its proposals should have been more Indian and more radical in a Biblical sense. It is true that theological thinking, in the years which followed the first great war, was deeply influenced by the prevailing temper of the age. In general, the Scheme too much resembles a synthesis of divergent western traditions to be wholly satisfactory. The provision that the different uniting bodies should continue to use the forms of worship to which they had been accustomed, while designed to meet the objections raised against changes in familiar ways of worship, really denotes the artificial form of union proposed. It is in regular worship that men realize and express their unity, and a standard Service Book would have been an invaluable aid in the production of real unity.

The Report does not hide the fact that the members of the Committee differed in their judgments on several important points; but a majority of the members agreed in the desire to see the Statement of the Faith of the Church amended so as to put the adherence of the Church of South India to the historic faith of the Catholic Church expressed in the Creeds, beyond all question. Ambiguities in the statement on the sacraments need to be removed, satisfactory provisions made in respect of the forms to be used at consecrations and ordinations and the rite of Confirmation, should as soon as practicable be made the general rule of the Church. Subject to these and certain other less important amendments, the committee is prepared to see the scheme go forward. No one can fail to realize the tremendous issues at stake, nor be altogether blind to the weaknesses of a method which assumes the need to combine the contributions of Episcopalian, Presbyterian and Congregationalist traditions. Whether the expectation that in a united Church these different traditions would grow together in a generation, can be justified, time alone will show. But the perpetuation of accustomed ways of worship and the traditional patterns of church life, will not ease the process of assimilation.

CHRISTIANITY IN DEFEAT.

ALL the world knows of the brave defiance of the Gestapo offered by Pastor Niemöller and his subsequent illegal imprisonment by the Nazis, but too often the real significance of his act has been obscured by notions of freedom or of democratic resistance to totalitarian tyranny. Even before the war, an iron curtain separated Christians in Germany from their fellow-believers in Western Europe, while during the war, news was reduced to the merest trickle of information. What was certain was that the victorious advance of German arms had provoked a crisis for the Christian Church far beyond

the frontiers of the Reich, while in Germany itself the Christian position steadily deteriorated. The first full-length report to come out of Germany since the end of the war is contained in a book by Stewart W. Herman entitled *The Rebirth of the German Church* (S.C.M. Press, 10/6). Dr. Herman has unusual qualifications to write such a book. From 1936 till the end of 1941 he was in charge of the American Lutheran Church in Berlin. After the war he was appointed secretary of the Department of Reconstruction and Interchurch Aid of the World Council of Churches, with the task of re-establishing relations with the German Churches. Hard on the heels of the Allied forces he was back again in Germany, and " spent the next months travelling by jeep, command car, army sedan, train and plane all over the prostrate country. In hundreds of instances I was the first foreign civilian to reach various German churchmen with news of the outside world, or, indeed, with news of Church events within the four zones of occupation." The report which Dr. Herman gives is based upon the conviction that " what happens to one group of Christians should be the intimate concern of Christians everywhere."

Let it be said at once that it is neither a colourful nor an heroic story, though the account is not without its heroic moments. But the Nazi authorities tried, with considerable success, to prevent churchmen from gaining the popularity which comes from dramatic martyrdoms. Their methods were not spectacular, but they exerted unremitting pressure on the Churches to compel them to fit into the place allotted to them in the national life by the master-planners. The battle of resistance had to be fought out in the realm of ecclesiastical affairs and within the bounds of the Church itself. The self-styled German Christians sought to exploit the Church organization in the interests of the Nazi revolution. The Christian counter-attack proceeded on the basis of the famous declaration of the Synod of Barmen at the end of May, 1934. " Jesus Christ, as He is testified to us in the Scriptures, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and to trust and obey in life and death."

What is important to remember is that the Church was subjected to stresses and strains in maintaining this fundamental Christian claim, and the picture given by Dr. Herman reveals clearly the differences of opinion even amongst the members of the Confessional group. It is an error to suppose that all Confessional pastors and church members were high-minded heroes and that all those who refrained from active participation in Confessional activities were doing the work of the Nazis. The pattern of historic events was much too complex to permit of so simple a judgment. What happened in Germany would be only too likely to be repeated in England if a similar tyranny were directed against the Church. Some of the more far-sighted leaders would demand thorough-going resistance at once (indeed, we have already had such demands presented to us), while others, without compromising their belief in the uniqueness of the Gospel message, would desire to make every possible concession in the hope of avoiding a conflict which could only impoverish both parties. The resistance of the Church to the world is always conducted in this confused way, for very rarely do the issues stand out in such naked simplicity that

no one can fail to be blind to their significance. This was true even in Germany, and the Nazi leaders were skilled in the use of every available technique for confusing the issues.

Nevertheless, the great importance of this report by Dr. Herman lies in the fact that he provides a well-documented case to justify the assertion that in spite of all weakness and apostasy (of which there was a good deal), the German Church " constituted the only significant and persistent record of resistance to Adolf Hitler." That is a fact of outstanding importance in the modern history of Europe. The most efficient tyranny which the world has yet seen failed to ruin the Church, or to destroy its faithfulness to the Gospel, despite the unbelievable strain to which it was subjected. The story of how one thousand young pastors, trained in secret seminaries and outlawed by the Nazis, were supported by voluntary offerings amounting to two million marks (£100,000) annually, raised and dispensed under the very noses of the Gestapo, is one of the most moving incidents recorded by Dr. Herman. Despite the iron curtain, which cut off church leaders from any knowledge of what was happening in the world, beyond what the government chose to let them know, the churches declined to respond to the appeal to declare a holy war in 1941 when the army invaded Communist Russia. The prophetic silence of that year was of far greater worth than many words.

The Evangelical Church in Germany wasted no time in ridding itself of ecclesiastical officers who had been maintained in power by the Nazi State. The denazification programme was more radical, more speedy and more just than the processes inaugurated by the occupying powers. As early as July 13th, 1945, the new government of the large Rhineland Church in Dusseldorf based its action upon a clear statement of principles. " Their basis (the German-Christian movement) is not the Holy Scriptures but the National Socialist world view. Their preaching . . . is not the Gospel of Jesus Christ, but veneration of a religious hero mixed with the glorification of a Nazi Reich and its Fuhrer as divine revelations. Their faith . . . is not justification by faith in a crucified and risen Lord, but a political credulity in the divine mission of the German people. . . . Since they contradict in doctrine and design the message and faith of the Christian Church, no one who takes this point of view may administer an office in the Christian Church." No single Church failed to take advantage of the Nazi defeat to eliminate those " who wanted to be Storm Troopers of Jesus Christ," and the process of elimination began at the top with men who held administrative positions. At the same time, fair if stern methods of trial were adopted and subsistence allowances granted for a period of time. In the less flagrant cases a man, while subjected to immediate discipline, was not debarred from a return to pastoral work in the future. Motives were usually very complex, and it would have been easy to perpetrate many injustices to curry favour with the occupation authorities.

In other chapters Dr. Herman points to the almost overwhelming problems which confront the German Evangelical Church in its hour of rebirth. The crowds of refugees, lacking the simplest necessities of food and clothing, must be helped somehow; and out of its own

desperate poverty and weakness, the Church has striven to minister to these hapless souls. The account given is well documented and should be most carefully studied. It would effectively check any easy optimism about the future either of Europe or of Christianity in Europe. Another problem concerns the survival of Evangelical Christianity in the Eastern districts occupied by Poland and Russia. The uprooting of the Church and its people from these districts makes terrifying reading, and it seems almost impossible to hope that faith can survive in such conditions. Has Christianity suffered an irreparable blow in Central and Eastern Europe?

The persistent and urgent need for food, fuel and clothing numbs the minds of many to the challenge of the hour, and it would ill befit British Christians, who enjoy comparative comfort, to point the finger of scorn at their German brethren. The question which remains is whether the leaders who stood firm in the time of persecution can now lead their people on to recovery and Christian renewal in this new day. Was Bishop Wurm right in commenting on the organization of a new provisional Church government—"Herewith a new period of German Church history commences"? The Churches, in the persons of their leaders and in their official declarations, have adopted a policy of repentance, confessing themselves bound with the whole nation "in a solidarity of guilt." Pastor Niemöller and others have declared the need for a deep Christian concern with mundane affairs. But will the ordinary church members follow their leaders? There has been much criticism and some misunderstanding of the leaders by the rank and file, and a serious controversy has developed on these issues. Can the German Church, which has been through the furnace, get the Christian message across the gulf which separates the Christian Church from the common life of modern man? Although there is genuine religious faith in Germany, apathy and ignorance are widespread, and it would be quite inaccurate to speak of a revival. Dr. Herman points out that a great deal will depend on whether the German nation is offered some political future so that hope can replace the present despair. The struggle for the soul of Europe goes on, and the forces of Evangelical Christianity have been gravely weakened through the events of the war. They require all the sympathy and help which Britain and America can give.

CROSSING THE FRONTIER.

IT cannot be denied that the subject of Evangelism has attracted great and growing attention in a wide variety of ecclesiastical assemblies; but neither can it be asserted that any noticeable success has been achieved in speaking to the condition of modern man. He remains obstinately outside the regular gatherings for worship, and either ignorant of or indifferent to the Gospel. The Church of Scotland has recently issued a statement on evangelism, under the title *Into All the World*, which in its brevity and theological grasp is a superior document to its English counterpart. "Evangelism is the perennial task of the Christian Church. It is always urgent. It is never completed. In each generation, moreover, the Church has afresh to realize that urgency, to face that task and to ponder how

it may best fulfil it in the given contemporary situation." When everything has been said about the inefficiency of the Church and the poor witness given by most church members, it must be admitted that circumstances seem to present at the moment a formidable obstacle to Christian advance. "The work of evangelism must reckon with an ignorance of the truths of Christianity no less profound than confronts the missionary in the Church's foreign service."

In addition to ignorance—which might be removed by a concentrated effort of Christian teaching—there is "a certain imperviousness in many people to the reception of Christian ideas and a sheer inability to understand the basic Christian concepts, even when the evangelist has won a patient hearing." The effects of the industrial revolution in breaking up the accustomed patterns of life and thought, have done far more, as John Baillie has reminded us, than the criticism offered by modern science, to alienate the masses from the Church. The report is quite emphatic on the necessity of taking into account the gulf which separates so many people from any form of organized religion, and shows that no evangelism is realistic which does not provide a means of bridging this gulf and of making real contact with the constituency which it seeks to approach.

This widening separation between those inside the Church and those outside it, which has reached such alarming proportions, leads to an emphasis in the Report upon what is called "the indirect approach." In addition to the traditional way of approach through conversion and confession of faith—which fails to make effective contact with the modern outsider—there must be an indirect approach in which, through seeking admittance to the places where people meet and where their activities are carried on, the Christian message can be given to the ignorant and indifferent. The press, the cinema, the radio, drama, industry, hospitals and schools, all offer spheres where Christians can begin to cross the frontier which separates them from modern unbelievers, and in terms of the particular technique with which they are dealing, begin to inculcate Christian ideas. It must, however, be recognized that such indirect evangelism has its limitations, and can only be justified if its ultimate aim is kept in mind.

The concern to "speak as people speak and to go where people are," will lead Christians into many unlikely situations and compel them to take seriously the problem of language. It is not merely necessary for preachers to adopt a persuasive simplicity of language, but the fundamental Christian ideas must be translated into the vernacular. Language and ideas inevitably go together, so that the evangelist will have to set himself the task of adding to the vocabulary of his hearers. "Words once familiar but now remote must be made vital again by putting into them the meaning which the Gospel gave them and which the modern world has so largely lost." This is a task which is calculated to require all the mental energy and imagination of Christians who take seriously the responsibility of witness in the modern world. But there could be no more rewarding task, and it would only be to repeat in the altered circumstances of the twentieth century what the first generations of Christians did in giving a new and more profound meaning to such words as faith, life and love.