

# Some Comments on the Anglican-Lutheran International Conversations

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THE REPORT\* recommends 'a greatly increased measure of inter-communion' between the two Churches, that Anglican and Lutheran Churches should welcome communicants from the other church, and that each church should encourage its own communicants to receive holy communion in churches of the other tradition 'subject to the claims of individual conscience and respect for the discipline of each Church' (p. 22). I wish to put forward two sets of considerations in favour of the view that these recommendations are wholly right, and can be endorsed with good conscience by Anglicans.

## 1. *The connexion between unity, apostolicity and ministerial structure in Lutheran theology*

MOST Anglicans and probably all Lutherans understand apostolic succession at least partly in terms of continuity of doctrinal confession. The Report speaks of 'continuity with the fundamental apostolic witness and commission'. Nevertheless it also gives the warning that 'it is the role which the succession of bishops plays within this wider concept of apostolicity which is one of the main controversial points between the two traditions' (p. 14). At the same time, it must be stressed that Lutheran theologians do not hold a view of the unity of the church which is merely inward and 'spiritual', but relate the concept of unity, catholicity, or apostolicity to questions about outward structure and ministerial commission. In the Lutheran/Roman Catholic Dialogue on Papal Primacy in 1974 it is stated that 'Catholics and Lutherans have in part recognised and employed similar means for fostering the unity of the universal Church' ('Ecumenical Notes and

\* *Anglican-Lutheran International Conversations—The Report of the Conversations 1970-1972 authorised by the Lambeth Conference and the Lutheran World Federation.* London, SPCK, 1973.

Documentation' in *One in Christ* 10, 1974, p. 278). The acceptance of given liturgies and ministries ranks alongside the acceptance of scripture and a common theological tradition as formally and visibly expressed in creeds and councils. The Lutheran/Roman Catholic Dialogue gives careful consideration to the image of Peter in the New Testament as a pastor caring for the universal church (pp. 279-284). One of the Lutheran participants in the Anglican-Lutheran Conversations writes elsewhere that 'If the Church is to continue to be an apostolic church, the commissioning of apostles must continue. This is done through the ministry of the church' (Regin Prenter, *The Church's Faith*, Philadelphia 1969, p. 172).

All this underlines the point made in the Conversations that Lutherans and Anglicans alike wish the unity of the church to be manifested 'in a visible way' (p. 13). 'The succession of apostolicity through time is guarded and given contemporary expression in and through a variety of means, activities, and institutions: the canon of scripture, creeds, confessional writings, liturgies, the activities of preaching, teaching, celebrating the sacraments and ordaining and using a ministry of Word and Sacrament, the exercising of pastoral care and oversight . . .' (p. 18). In other words, from a *functional* point of view, the Lutheran conceptions of unity and apostolicity lack nothing which is otherwise conveyed in an Anglican interpretation of episcopacy, *unless* this is said to hinge on the crudely mechanistic idea of succession which is now widely discredited (cf. for example, the comments of Prof. G. W. H. Lampe in 'The "Limuru Principle" and Church Unity' in *The Churchman* 88, 1974, pp. 28-30). This cruder view of episcopal succession comes very near to being implied if distinctions in arrangements for intercommunion are made between, say, the Danish Church, whose bishops were not consecrated by bishops at the time of the Reformation, and Sweden, where, in these terms the 'succession' remains unbroken.

Lutherans themselves, it should be noted, do not seem to draw radical contrasts between the different Lutheran Churches, and the Anglican-Lutheran Conversations rightly and explicitly deplore 'a distinction in the intercommunion arrangements made for various Lutheran Churches' (p. 22).

Also under this point, we may recall the statements about Lutheranism made by Paul Tillich, who in the present context of discussion, stands as one of the most 'Protestant' of its thinkers. Tillich contrasts the 'ecclesiastical' type of church favoured by Luther, Zwingli and Calvin, and reflected in Lutheranism, with the 'sectarian' churches of the evangelical radicals. He writes, 'The ecclesiastical type of church is the mother from which we come. This is quite different from the churches of the radical enthusiasts, where the individual . . . is the creative power of the Church' (P. Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought*, London, 1968, p. 252).

The detailed positions of various historical statements within Lutheranism are set out in the form of summary and quotation in Carl S. Meyer's essay 'Apostolicity and Ministry' in *Lutheran-Episcopal Dialogue: A Progress Report*, 1972 (r.p. from *Concordia Theological Monthly*, 1972) pp. 94-126. Meyer concludes 'A recognition of the validity of the Lutheran Ministry by the Episcopalian (Anglican) church and of the Lutheran churches of the validity of orders of the Episcopalian (Anglican) church could contribute to the well-being of the church, the people of God' (pp. 115-116).

As a postscript to this point, it is worth noting that Lutherans define intercommunion in terms of pulpit fellowship as well as fellowship in the holy communion. When one recalls the vast theological influence on Anglican thinkers of Bultmann, Tillich, Althaus, Bornkamm, Käsemann, Ebeling, Schlink, and many others, it would be unrealistic to ignore the fact that the ideas of these men find their way repeatedly into Anglican pulpits. We are thus already more than half way in practice towards a working relationship of intercommunion, whether or not this is recognised in theory. To stop short of 'altar fellowship' is therefore, in effect if not in intention, to separate word and sacrament.

## 2. *Questions about the 'necessity' for episcopal orders and Lutheran scruples about justification by faith*

ARGUMENTS in favour of intercommunion between Lutherans and Anglicans usually recall the actual practices of Anglican bishops and theologians in the Elizabethan period as set out, for example, in Norman Sykes' book *Old Priest and New Presbyterian* (Cambridge, 1956). Sykes' thesis, as is well known, is that the Tractarian interpretation of episcopacy is more demanding and more specific than mainstream Anglican tradition. For firstly, 'Anglican apologetic for episcopacy as necessary where it could be had, but its lack not unchurching those churches deprived of it by historical circumstances, adopted the principle of episcopal government and ordination as being of the *plene esse* rather than of the *esse* of the Church' (p. 84). Secondly, Anglicans at the time of the Reformation '*explicitly allowed the orders and sacraments of the foreign Protestants who lacked bishops*' (p. 211, *my italics*).

All this has become well-worn ground. But it is perhaps worth taking up part of the argument made by way of reply to Sykes in A. L. Peck's book *Anglicanism and Episcopacy* (Faith Press, London, 1958). One of Peck's claims is that Norman Sykes persistently ignores 'the qualifying condition of "necessity" which was the only ground on which the 17th century Anglican writers admitted the "Validity" of non-episcopal orders and sacraments, i.e. they held that circumstances had arisen in which it could be believed that God waived his divinely-

appointed requirement of episcopacy, so that such orders and sacraments were used by Him' (p. 41). Peck insists that no such 'necessity' is laid on the non-episcopal churches today.

It might be possible to argue towards some historical conclusion from the fact that German Lutheran 'Superintendents' received the title of 'Bishop' only under the Third Reich. However, I am more concerned to make the theological point that Lutherans, *by necessity*, could not in the nature of the case accept episcopacy as a condition of recognition of the validity of their orders and sacraments, given the Lutheran interpretation of justification by faith. Paul Tillich, in particular, writes, 'Protestant theology protests in the name of the Protestant principle against the identification of our ultimate concern with any creation of the church . . .' (*Systematic Theology* 1, London, 1953, p. 42). God does not accept man because of anything that he does, whether this be an intellectual or religious 'work'. Similarly it is worth remembering that according to Bultmann 'Our radical attempt to demythologise the New Testament is in fact a perfect parallel to St. Paul's and Luther's doctrine of justification by faith alone apart from the works of the law. Or rather, it carries this doctrine to its logical conclusion . . . like the doctrine of justification it destroys every false security . . .' (*Kerygma and Myth* 1, London, 1953, pp. 210-211). Thirdly, Käsemann is so anxious to preserve the Pauline doctrine that he sees the early 'catholicism' of Acts and the Pastorals as a dangerous moving away from the primitive faith of Paul. If Bultmann considers first-century cosmology as being (in these terms) dispensable, and Tillich considers 'religious institutions' (in these terms) dispensable, they can hardly act with less hostility towards arguments about the 'necessity' of episcopacy as part of the essence of the gospel.

In such an atmosphere, the suggestion that the historic episcopate is somehow a *condition* of acceptability whereby a particular church either comes to have (or is at least recognised to have) valid sacraments and valid Christian experience, must appear to run closely parallel to the demand for circumcision made by the Jerusalem Church to the Galatians. The parallels are, in fact, striking. Circumcision was ordained by God, and it guaranteed historical continuity. There were reasons of practical policy why the Jerusalem Church accepted and encouraged it, and why Peter hesitated to have table-fellowship with uncircumcised Gentile Christians. Only Paul saw that the consequences of such an outlook were in effect to proclaim 'another gospel'. The institutional sign of continuity had defeated its own end, and the sincere arguments of the conservative Christians of the Jerusalem Church did more harm than good.

### 3. *Additional Note—the Plurality of the New Testament*

I HAVE tried to argue the first two points on the basis of common ground among Anglicans. The final paragraph only repeats a more controversial point, which is a familiar one. However, the reason for doing so is that the *pluralism* of the New Testament is recognised today more clearly than ever before. (On the question of 'bishops' in the New Testament cf. especially the comments of Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Oxford, 1971, pp. 163-165, where he warns us not 'to force modern notions on the text', and 592-593; and John Line, *The Doctrine of the Christian Ministry*, London, 1959, especially chapters 2 and 4.)

There have always been two possible reactions to this phenomenon of pluralism, in terms of questions about the ministry. One reaction has been to argue that since the New Testament attitude towards episcopacy is indecisive, we must begin our study of it with Ignatius. But this is not the only, or most obvious, inference to draw. A second reaction has been to argue that if the New Testament traditions reflect diversity of practice, it would be unfaithful to those traditions to impose one given pattern, rather than another, onto subsequent generations of the church. The least that can be said, by way of comment, is that the rightness of the first reaction and the wrongness of the second should not simply be taken for granted now by Anglicans (cf. especially R. E. Nixon, 'Oversight and Bishops' in J. I. Packer, ed., *All in Each Place*, Abingdon, 1965, pp. 160-165).