

# The Basis of Christian Unity

Professor Donald Macleod

Free Church of Scotland College, Edinburgh

It is very tempting to regard doctrinal agreement as the basis of Christian unity. We must resist the temptation, however. The basis lies much deeper. The real foundation of our oneness is our common membership of the body of Christ. This, at least, has been the historic Reformed view. Calvin, for example, is clear on it: "By the unity of the church we must understand a unity into which we feel persuaded that we are truly ingrafted. For unless we are united with all the other members under Christ our Head, no hope of the future inheritance awaits us. All the elect of God are so joined together in Christ that as they depend on one Head, so they are as it were compacted into one body, being knit together like its different members; made truly one by living together under the same Spirit of God in one faith, hope and charity, called not only to the same inheritance of eternal life, but to participation in one God and Christ"<sup>1</sup>. More succinctly, but to the same effect, he writes in the next paragraph: "For if they are truly persuaded that God is the common Father of them all, and Christ their common Head, they cannot but be united together in brotherly love, and mutually impart their blessings to each other."

Calvin's successors retained this point of view. According to John Owen, "The Lord Jesus Christ Himself is the original and spring of this union, and every particular church is united to Him as its Head. This relation of the Church unto Christ as its Head, the apostle expressly affirms to be the foundation and cause of its union. Eph. 4:15, 16; Col. 2:19. And unless this union be dissolved, unless a church be disunited from Christ, it cannot be so far from the catholic church, nor any true church of Christ in particular, however it may be dealt withal by others in the world."<sup>2</sup>

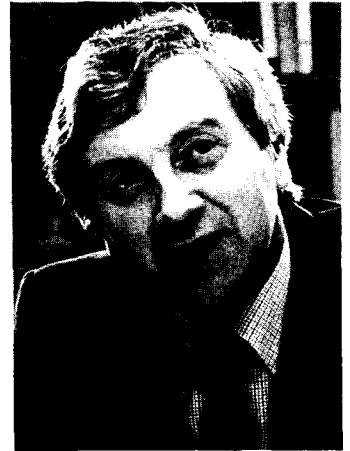
Charles Hodge wrote in similar vein: "All Protestants agree that the Church in heaven and on earth is one. There is one fold, one kingdom, one family, one body. They all agree that Christ is the centre of this unity. Believers are one body in Christ Jesus; that is, in virtue of their union with Him."<sup>3</sup>

This is the clear New Testament position: we are one not because of a common polity or a common belief but because we are all Christians. The idea is expressed in a variety of ways. We are all members of the body of Christ. (1 Cor. 12, 13ff). We are all branches of the vine (John 15:1ff). We are all members of the household of God (Eph. 2:19). We are all fellow-citizens with the saints (Eph. 2:19). We have all been given to Christ (Jn. 17:24), born again by the Spirit (Jn. 3:3), and indwelt by the triune God (Jn. 14:23). We all have God for our Father (1 Jn. 3:1), Christ for our Shepherd (Jn. 10:1ff), and the Holy Spirit for our Comforter.

This spiritual unity, an undeniable and irreversible fact, constitutes an unconditional obligation. Because we are united at this level, we owe one another, simply as Christians, recognition, assistance, love and co-operation. We have no right to insist on some other condition. We are one *in Christ*. We may offend against this unity, but we cannot undo it. We only incur the reproach of factiousness and schism.

Nor can we be content with a purely spiritual, ideal, Platonic unity. The believer is not an idea but flesh and blood. The Church is not an idea but flesh and blood. The unity of the Church must have the same visible, concrete reality. This is what the Lord prayed for: "That they all may be one, that the world may believe that Thou hast sent me" (Jn. 17:21). The love Christians had for one another was one that the world could see and be impressed by. It became visible in caring for one another (even when they were separated by hundreds of miles, Acts 11:29), by co-operation in evangelism (Phil. 1:5), by public assembly (Heb. 10:25), by mutual consultation (Acts 15:1ff), and by respect for universal practice (1 Cor. 11:33ff). Howard A.

*Professor Donald Macleod, of the Department of Systematic Theology at the Free Church of Scotland College, Edinburgh and editor of the Monthly Record challenges us to take a fresh look at the basis of Christian Unity.*



Snyder rightly warns against a Platonic dualism which distinguishes between an ideal church (which is safely one) and the real church (which is fragmented, but need not be concerned about it) and goes on to say: "There is but one people of God on earth, and it is as the people of God that the church is one. This is much more than an invisible spiritual unity. It exists (although imperfectly) in space and time, and for both theological and practical reasons it must be given some structural expression."<sup>4</sup>

## Recognising a church

This immediately throws up the problem of recognition. How does one know a Christian or a church when one sees one?

With regard to the former, the surest indication we have is the practice of the apostolic church in connection with baptism. Philip, for example, baptises the Ethiopian on the basis of a very simple profession of faith: "I believe that Jesus is the Son of God" (Acts 8:37). We know a little more about the 3000 baptised at Pentecost: they had been convicted by Peter's message, they cried out for spiritual help and they "gladly received the word". As such, they were baptised: and afterwards they continued to attend the apostles' instruction, they shared in the fellowship and they participated in the breaking of bread and in the prayers (Acts 2:42).

The most remarkable feature of the apostles' practice is the speed with which they acted in receiving new members. We see this not only in the instances already cited, but also in the cases of Lydia (Acts 16:15), the Jailer (Acts 16:33), and the household of Cornelius (Acts 10:48). There was no period of probation and certainly "no inquisitorial minuteness" (to quote a phrase from *The Practice of the Free Church of Scotland*). They acted on the judgment of charity. This obviously involved the risk of being wrong and sometimes the apostles *were* wrong: they admitted into the Church people whose subsequent conduct showed that they had "neither part nor lot in this matter". Nor is there any indication within the developing revelation of the New Testament that the apostles ever altered their procedure. To the very end, membership rested on simple profession of faith, judged charitably. The remedy lay not in undue scrutiny at the point of admission but in the application of discipline to unruly members.

Most of us represent so-called "gathered churches", and this aspect of New Testament teaching should give us pause. "There's no art to find the mind's construction in the face" said Shakespeare, and there certainly is no way that church elders can determine a man's spiritual condition from the way he performs in an interview. However great our zeal, we are left judging only "the outward

appearance". To pretend that one can do more is to make ourselves ridiculous: and to pretend that our churches contain none but saints is to pretend to an insight far exceeding the apostles. In the last analysis, in any tradition, we build the temple with *professed* believers.

But what matters for this paper is not so much how we recognise individual Christians as how we can recognise authentic churches. It was to meet this need that the Reformers developed the doctrine of the so-called *marks of the Church*. The historical context in which they worked is important. The Reformers were very conscious of the possibility of schism and exceedingly sensitive to the charge that they were guilty of it. This is particularly true of Calvin, who once wrote: "Those who disrupt from the body of Christ and split its unity into schisms, are quite excluded from the hope of salvation, so long as they remain in dissidence of this kind."<sup>5</sup> It is not surprising that, holding such a view of the gravity of schisms, he should reply at length to Sadoleto's oft-repeated charge that he was "forsaking the church". "It is scarcely possible" said Calvin, "that the minds of the common people should not be greatly alienated from you by the many examples of cruelty, avarice, intemperance, annoyance, insolence, lust and all sorts of wickedness, which were openly manifested by men of your order. But, he adds most significantly, "none of those things would have driven us to an attempt which we made under a much stronger necessity. This necessity was that the light of divine truth had been extinguished, the Word of God buried, the virtue of Christ left in profound oblivion and the pastoral office subverted"<sup>6</sup>. A little later, he returned to the same theme: "As to the charge of forsaking the Church, which they are accustomed to bring against me, there is nothing here of which my conscience accuses me, unless indeed he is to be considered a deserter who, seeing the soldiers routed and scattered and abandoning the ranks, raises the leader's standard and recalls them to their post."<sup>7</sup>

Clearly, Calvin worried about schism. Clearly too, he held that deviations from the norms of Christian conduct did not warrant separation from a professing church. And clearly, above all, he held that the decisive consideration must be adherence to the truth and to the Word of God.

It was in this context that Calvin developed his doctrine of the *marks*. He had to rebut the charge of schism: and he had to defend the claim of the Protestants that their churches were real churches.

For Calvin, himself, there were two marks: the ministry of the Word and the administration of the sacraments: "When we say that the pure ministry of the Word and pure celebration of the sacraments is a fit pledge and earnest, so that we may safely recognise a church in every society in which both exist, our meaning is, that we are never to discard it so long as these remain, though it may otherwise teem with numerous faults"<sup>8</sup>. But subsequent Reformed theology made significant additions to Calvin's two marks. *The Scots Confession* of 1560 (Chap. XVIII) added "ecclesiastical discipline uprightly administered". The Westminster Confession added "*public worship* performed, more or less, purely". (Chap. XXV). But the most interesting addition of all was made by the Second Book of Discipline, (Chap. II): "the whole polity of the Church consists in three things, *vtz.*, in Doctrine, Discipline and Distribution". "Distribution" in this connection means what today would be called the Church's ministry of compassion, the distribution of relief through the diaconate. Its inclusion here is most perceptive.

The result of Reformed reflection over the 16th and 17th centuries is, then, that five distinct factors enter into the question of ecclesiastical recognition: the preaching of the Word, the administration of the sacraments, discipline, public worship and distribution.

### The Preaching of the Word

The danger here is that we may overlook the emphasis on *preaching* the Word. It is not the mere possession of the

truth and certainly not its encapsulation in a formal constitution that decides the issue: but whether we actually proclaim it. The question being asked at last is whether a church is faithful to the Great Commission: Does it *go* and teach? A church is not a church unless it evangelises. Some years ago, the Reverend Bill Dyer, speaking at the Borders Conference, said that many Reformed churches did no more than pay lip-service to this principle: they put up a church notice advertising the times of their services and saying, 'All welcome!'. "That," said Mr Dyer, "is like a fisherman putting up a notice to the effect, 'All fish welcome here!'. We cannot evangelise by attraction. We have to evangelise by aggression, going at the world with the gospel. The mere possession of the word of life is not enough. We have to hold it forth. (Phil. 2:16).

The converse of this is that a church may have a defective constitution and yet preach the gospel. To take one example: the current effective constitution of the Church of Scotland is theologically minimal. While giving a courteous nod to the Westminster Confession, in practice the Church is bound to nothing except the doctrine of the Trinity and "The Scottish Reformation". Because there is no standard of theology, the most bewildering theological pluralism prevails. The constitution does not safeguard the gospel. Yet, there is no denying that the gospel is preached: fully and brilliantly in some pulpits, adequately in others, minimally in yet others (and probably not all in some).

In any judgment of a church then, we have to look beyond its actual constitution. Some with admirable constitutions do nothing by way of evangelism: while others, with radically defective constitutions, do a great deal. The question is whether the church in the totality of its life, communicates and expresses the gospel.

Obviously there can never be complete doctrinal agreement among Christians. No two believers will be unanimous on the whole range of their beliefs. It was for this reason that while the Reformers and their successors laid such emphasis on doctrine as a mark of a true church, they were careful not to insist on too wide an area of agreement. A man like Burroughs, for example, was anxious that "articles should be as few as may be" while Cradock ascribed much of the fragmentation of the church to an over-scrupulous orthodoxy: "There will never be peace among the saints as long as every one stands so firm on his points and will not abate an ace"<sup>9</sup>.

What these men were pleading for was a sense of theological proportion. Some doctrines were fundamental and some were not. Some were primary and some were secondary.

---

### It is not the mere possession of the truth and certainly not its encapsulation in a formal constitution that decides the issue: but whether we actually proclaim it.

---

This distinction was clearly drawn by the Second Vatican Council: "Catholic theologians, in comparing doctrines, should bear in mind that there is an order or hierarchy of the truths of Catholic doctrine, since these truths are variously linked up with the foundation of the Christian faith. All doctrines are equally necessary. But they are not all equally important."<sup>10</sup>

However, this distinction was a commonplace of Reformed theology, centuries before Vatican II. It goes back at least as far as John Calvin, who said bluntly, "All the heads of true doctrine are not in the same position"<sup>11</sup>. In the following chapter, he speaks of certain errors in the ministry of the word and sacraments as "trivial", and goes on to define precisely what he means: "These are errors by which the fundamental doctrine of religion is not injured, and by which these articles of religion, in which all believers should agree, are not suppressed."

The Church dies only when "falsehood has forced its way into the citadel of religion and the sum of necessary doctrine is inverted."<sup>12</sup>

So far as Calvin was concerned, a church could retain a pure ministry of the word and yet "otherwise teem with numerous faults". "Nay," he writes, "even in the administration of word and sacraments defects may creep in which ought not to alienate us from its communion. For all the heads of true doctrine are not in the same position. Some are so necessary to be known that all must hold them to be fixed and undoubted as the proper credentials of religion: for instance, that God is one, that Christ is God, and the Son of God, that our salvation depends on the mercy of God, and the like. Others again, which are the subject of controversy among the churches, do not destroy the unity of the faith. For why should it be regarded as a ground of dissension between churches, if one, without any spirit of contention or perverseness in dogmatizing, hold that the soul, in quitting the body, flies to heaven, and another, without venturing to speak positively as to the abode, holds it for certain that it lives with the Lord? A difference of opinion as to these matters which are not absolutely necessary ought not to be a ground of dissension among Christians. The best thing, indeed, is to be perfectly agreed, but seeing there is no man who is not involved in the mists of ignorance, we must either have no church at all, or pardon delusion in those things of which we may be ignorant, without violating the substance of religion, and forfeiting salvation. Here, however, I have no wish to patronise even minutest errors, as if I thought it right to foster them by flattery or connivance: what I say is, that we are not on account of every minute difference to abandon a church, provided it retains sound and unimpaired that doctrine in which the safety of piety consists, and keeps the rite of the sacraments instituted by the Lord. Meanwhile, if we strive to reform what is offensive, we act in the discharge of duty."<sup>13</sup>

The theologians of the 17th century accepted Calvin's distinction unreservedly and applied it vigorously against the schismatics of their own day. Rutherford, for example, defended the separation from Rome on the very same ground as the Reformer: "though they profess the true God, as Edom did, *yet they clearly evert the fundamentals.*" He went on to say, "If a preacher be sound in the main, though he mix errors with his teaching, you may sit under his ministry."<sup>14</sup>

John Owen differed from Rutherford on many things, not least on church polity. But he fully accepted the distinction between fundamental and non-fundamental doctrines. In his classic work, *On the True Nature of a Gospel Church*, for example, he asks, "whether a man may be excommunicated for errors in matters of faith, or false opinions about them" and answers: "If the errors intended are about or against the *fundamental truths* of the gospel, so as that they that hold them cannot 'hold the Head' but really 'make shipwreck of the faith', no pretended usefulness of such persons nor peaceableness as unto outward deportment, can countenance the church in forbearing, after due admonition, to cut them off from their communion."<sup>15</sup> A few lines later, he adds, "False opinions in lesser things, when the foundation of faith and Christian practice is not immediately concerned, may be tolerated in a church."

Probably the fullest exposition of this distinction is to be found in the work of the 19th century Scottish theologian, William Cunningham. Cunningham lays down the general principle that, "There is a great difference in point of intrinsic importance among the many truths of different classes taught in Scripture."<sup>16</sup> The general measure of a doctrine's importance, he says, is its relation to the leading object of revelation, which is to make known the ruin and recovery of mankind.

Cunningham applies this distinction in four different directions.

First, in relation to Roman Catholicism: "It is manifestly impossible to unravel the sophistries and to answer the

arguments of Papists on the subject of the unity of the church without admitting or assuming the existence of a distinction in point of intrinsic importance among the articles of revealed truth—a distinction commonly expressed by saying that some are fundamental and some are not."<sup>17</sup> Those who hold to these fundamental doctrines belong to the one church of Christ, even though they live outwith the communion of Rome.

---

**The fundamental doctrines are those without which we cannot live to the glory of God, come to maturity in faith, experience biblical sanctification or live lives of obedience.**

---

Secondly, Cunningham applied the distinction in evaluating Socinianism. The churches have held themselves fully warranted in denying the Socinians the name and character of Christians on the ground that, "Socinianism is a deliberate and determined rejection of *the whole substance of the message* which Christ and His apostles conveyed from God to man"<sup>18</sup>.

Thirdly, he applied the distinction in assessing the Pelagian controversy and came to what by today's standards would be a remarkable conclusion: "The history of the church seems to indicate that somehow the prosperity of vital religion is more clearly connected with correct views of the points involved in the Pelagian controversy than even with correct views upon the subject of the Trinity and of the person of Christ."<sup>19</sup>

Fourthly, Cunningham applied the distinction between fundamental and non-fundamental doctrines when he came to assessing the relative importance of the Arminian controversy. This is probably the area where Reformed churchmen are most liable to lose a sense of proportion. Cunningham supplies a useful corrective: "In the scheme of Christian theology," he writes, "there is a class of doctrines which may be said to occupy a higher platform than what are commonly called the distinctives of Calvinism"<sup>20</sup>. Specifically, these are the doctrines which Calvinists have in common with orthodox Lutherans and evangelical Arminians: human depravity, the deity and humanity of Christ, the atonement, the Spirit's agency in regeneration and sanctification. "Those who agree with us in holding Scriptural views on these points, while they reject the peculiar doctrines of Calvinism", writes Cunningham, "agree with us on subjects that are more important and fundamental and that ought to occupy a more prominent place in the ordinary course of public instruction than those in which they differ from us."

Cunningham was conscious, of course, that Calvinists had not always retained a biblical sense of proportion in connection with their favourite doctrines. "There can be no reasonable doubt", he comments, "that the peculiarities of Calvinism were raised for a time to a position of undue prominence and that there are plain indications of this in some of the features of the theological literature of the 17th century." "We have the highest sense," he continues, "of the value for many important purposes, of these theological systems. But we cannot doubt that Calvin's *Institutes* is fitted to leave upon the mind a juster and sounder impression of the place which the doctrines of Calvinism hold in the Bible, and ought to hold permanently in the usual course of pulpit instruction, or in the ordinary preaching of the gospel"<sup>21</sup>.

Or, we might add, in whatever is to serve as the basis of Christian unity.

A word of caution is necessary, however. George Gillespie rightly warns against equating fundamental doctrines with "the first rudiments, or A,B,C, of a catechism, which we first of all put to new beginners." "Heresy", he writes, "is not to be so far restricted as that no error shall be

accounted heretical but that which is destructive to some fundamental of the Christian faith: if by a fundamental article you understand such a truth without the knowledge and faith of which it is impossible to get salvation."<sup>22</sup> How much did any of us know, consciously, and articulately, in the first moment of faith in Christ? How much did Lydia know when she was baptised? Or the Philippian Jailer (Acts 16:15,32) or Naaman the Syrian (2 Kings. 5:15)? At the commencement of our own Christian lives, we are, all of us, ignorant of some fundamental doctrines.

A doctrinal basis of union between churches cannot be levelled to the capacity of spiritual infants. It is impossible to answer the question, How much must a human being know before we can judge him to be in a state of salvation? The real question, in the language of the Westminster Confession, is, how much must be known for God's glory, man's salvation, faith and life? (Chap. I:VI). In this form of words, the meaning of salvation is not restricted to conversion. It includes the whole experience of salvation, including sanctification and the life of faith. The fundamental doctrines are those without which we cannot live to the glory of God, come to maturity in faith, experience biblical sanctification or live lives of obedience.

### Identifying fundamental doctrines

But how are we to identify them?

First, they are the doctrines "so clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or other that not only the learned but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them"<sup>23</sup>. The assumption here is that whatever the ambiguity of Scripture on some peripheral matters it will speak with unmistakable clarity on the fundamentals: and this will be reflected in the unanimity of the Lord's people on these issues. These doctrines are already clear for the most part in the Old Testament and figure prominently in the message which Paul brought before the Areopagus (Acts 17:1ff). They include the unity, spirituality, holiness, graciousness of God: the doctrines of creation and providence; the affirmation of man as a creature made by God in His own image but now fallen and depraved; and the doctrine of man's accountability at a final reckoning.

Secondly, there are doctrines which the New Testament specifically affirms to be fundamental. The most important passage in this connection is 1 Cor. 15:3: "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that He was buried, that He rose on the third day according to the Scripture and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve." Behind the words, as of first importance there lies the Greek phrase *en protois*, literally, "among the first things". This is itself a clear recognition of a distinction between matters of primary importance and matters of only secondary importance. Among the primary and fundamental things are, for Paul, the authority of Scripture, the doctrine of vicarious, sacrificial atonement and the resurrection of Christ. These things stood in the forefront of the evangelistic message.

Another interesting passage is Galatians 1:8, "If we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed." If certain elements in the message are tampered with, then the gospel ceases to be a gospel (verse 7). What these elements are is clear from the Epistle as a whole: justification has its source in the grace of God, its ground in the work of Christ, and the only contribution we make to it is to believe. Justification by faith alone, in other words, is fundamental. To abandon it is to desert Christ and turn to an alien religion.

The fundamental status of the resurrection of Christ is emphasised again in 1 Cor. 15:14: "If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain." Paul obviously has in mind a literal resurrection (a resurrection of the flesh) because its proof is that Christ was *seen* (verses 5 and 6). If that doctrine is not true, says

the Apostle, then Christian faith is a pathetic waste of time.

---

**Among the primary and fundamental things are, for Paul, the authority of Scripture, the doctrine of vicarious, sacrificial atonement and the resurrection of Christ. These things stood in the forefront of the evangelistic message.**

---

In 2 Tim. 2:17, it is not the resurrection of Christ but the resurrection of believers (and possibly, of all men) that is in view. Hymenaeus and Philetus have subverted this doctrine not by denying it outright but by spiritualising it. According to them, the resurrection has already taken place. Paul reacts passionately. Such teaching is tantamount to turning away from the truth itself. It eats away at faith like a gangrene. It attacks the very foundation on which the Church is built.

Turning very briefly to the question of Christology, we note two crucial passages. One is Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God" (Mt. 16:16). This confession, asserting both the Messiahship and the deity of Christ, is the rock on which the Church is built. Apart from it, worship of Christ is pure idolatry.

The other passage is 1 John 4:1: "Every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God. This is the spirit of anti-Christ." It is a curiosity of the history of doctrine that the first major Christological heresy should be Docetism, with its denial of the humanness of Christ. To deny that humanness, that flesh, is heresy, says John. Today this is something that we are inclined to forget, imagining that in the desperate struggle to defend the Saviour's deity we must concede as little as possible to His humanity. "Scarcely any of us in Scotland", lamented Dr John Duncan, "give due prominence to the Incarnation"<sup>24</sup>.

The third category of fundamental doctrines consists of those which are enshrined in the great creeds of the Church. These overlap largely with those asserted by Scripture itself to be primary. Or, to express it otherwise, they represent the doctrines believed by all Christians, always and everywhere. The most universal and comprehensive of these is the Apostles Creed, a summary of basic doctrines going back to the 4th century. This summary includes: the fatherhood of God, His almightiness as Creator, the divine sonship of Christ, His virgin birth, His crucifixion, death and burial, his resurrection and ascension, his second coming, the unity, holiness and catholicity of the Church, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.

The later creeds gave sharp focus to crucial doctrines as these provisionally become subjects of acute controversy and thorough investigation. The Nicene Creed focussed particularly on the deity of Christ, giving it precise expression in the word *homoousios*: Christ is one and the same in being with God the Father. The later Nicaeno/Constantinopolitan Creed made the similar claim for the Holy Spirit. The Athanasian Creed gathered the specific assertions of these two earlier ones into a comprehensive statement of the doctrine of the Trinity. The Formula of Chalcedon (451 AD) gave dogmatic formulation to the Church's primary Christological convictions: Christ is true God, Christ is true man, Christ is one person. The Reformation Creeds asserted the gospel over against the semi-Pelagianism of Rome, giving belated formal expression to the distinctive theology of Augustine. These creeds proclaimed the total (pervasive) depravity of man, and the necessity and actuality of salvation by grace.

There is then a three-fold approach to the problem of

ascertaining fundamental doctrines: what doctrines are revealed in Scripture with such clarity that all Christians are agreed on them? What doctrines does Scripture itself describe as fundamental? and what doctrines has the Church sought to define and safeguard in its great creeds?

Having asked these questions, the first thing that strikes us is how long the list of fundamental doctrines actually is:

- (1) the unity, spirituality, personalness, holiness and graciousness of God.
- (2) the doctrine of creation: especially the creation of man in the image of God.
- (3) the fall, and the depravity, of man.
- (4) man's accountability to God at a final judgment.
- (5) the authority of the Scriptures.
- (6) Vicarious atonement by the sacrifice of Christ.
- (7) the resurrection of Christ.
- (8) justification by faith alone.
- (9) the resurrection of the body.
- (10) the consubstantial deity of Christ.
- (11) the true and perfect humanity of Christ.
- (12) the virgin birth of Christ.
- (13) the ascension.
- (14) the second coming.
- (15) the Church as a divine institution, marked by unity, holiness and universality.
- (16) the consubstantial deity and authentic personalness of the Holy Spirit.
- (17) the fatherhood of God.
- (18) the life everlasting.

When we consider that the Westminster Confession, often criticised for inordinate length, has only 33 chapters, 10 of which deal with matters relating to the Church, the sacraments and the civil power, it is astonishing that even a cursory examination of first principles should yield 18 fundamental articles. The plea for a minimal confession (for example: "Jesus Christ is Lord!") clearly cannot claim the support of Scripture.

The second intriguing fact is that so far as doctrine is concerned there really is a surprising unanimity among Christians. As Charles Hodge points out, "It is far greater than would be inferred from the contentions of theologians, and it includes everything essential to Christianity"<sup>25</sup>. In fact, in many instances, it would be hypocrisy to claim that our divisions had anything to do with doctrinal considerations at all. Many of them have been the result of differences of opinion on matters of Church government, worship and discipline: of disputes on baptism, exclusive psalmody, and relations with the state. Too many churches are split-offs from other churches and owe their existence to nothing more honourable than clashes of personality.

Thirdly, in many of the instances when doctrinal considerations have entered into the calculations, the doctrines concerned have been relatively unimportant. Some churches have split over the millenium, others over the role of the civil magistrate in religion and yet others on the issue of common grace. No one with any sense of theological proportion can defend such separations. Reformed theologians have never been unanimous on these questions, any more than they have dogmatised on the infra-supra-lapsarian controversy or the length of the days of Genesis. Dabney differed from Hodge on some questions relating to the imputation of Adam's sin: and Owen disagreed with Rutherford on whether retributive justice was essential or discretionary in God. In these intra-confessional (as distinct from inter-confessional) disputes, men held their views firmly and argued them passionately. But they would not set up separate churches.

Fourthly, it seems clear, on any realistic scale of theological values, that the points of difference between evangelicals and Roman Catholics are not as important as those between evangelicals and Socinians (and their modern counterparts, so-called radical theologians of all hues). Because of history, the reaction of Evangelicals to Roman Catholicism is often irrational and sometimes even hysterical. Yet, so far as fundamental doctrines are concerned,

Socinianism was much more dangerous. It denied the authority of Scripture, the deity of Christ, the trinity and the atonement. Their modern counterparts do the same and even carry the assault further. The advocates of demythologisation argue that we can now know virtually nothing of the life and teaching of Christ. Others spiritualise the resurrection, just like Hymenaeus and Philetus. Yet others deny the immortality of the soul. Most modern theologians deny the doctrine of a historic Fall (and thus accept implicitly the manichean doctrine that God made man evil). And at the farthest extreme, some, while professing to be Christians, deny the existence of a personal God.

---

**There are fundamentals beneath justification. The person of Christ is fundamental. Justification by faith is the meeting-point of many doctrines, a rallying centre of theology; but it is not the foundation.**

---

Yet, to many Christians, the Pope is more damnable than Don Cupitt. This is irrational. According to the Apostle John, the antichrist is the one who denies the incarnation. Yet in the whole range of Christological dogmas, Rome has stood firm: in fact the Formula of Chalcedon, that bulwark of orthodoxy, reflects, substantially, the famous *tome* of Pope Leo the Great (400-461).

The sentiments of Dr John Duncan on this whole question are worth pondering. "Very many Protestants," he once said, "are Nestorian without knowing it. It is not so with the Catholics. You will never find a Roman priest wandering from the Catholic faith or the person of Christ, or in reference to the Trinity."<sup>26</sup> When asked, "How do you account for that?", Duncan replied: "It is probably because the idler Protestants have engrossed themselves with the one doctrine of justification, and made it bulk too largely, forgetting its foundation. There are fundamentals beneath justification. The person of Christ is fundamental. Justification by faith is the meeting-point of many doctrines, a rallying centre of theology; but it is not the foundation doctrine."

Since Duncan's day, of course, things have changed. Vatican II represents a Catholic ethos radically more evangelical than Vatican I (an ethos which the hierarchy appears to be currently in process of rejecting); and Roman Catholic scholars, such as Hans Küng and Edward Schillebeeckx have both advocated Christologies which blatantly contradict Catholic orthodoxy. Yet the papacy has dealt far more firmly with these deviants than have the Protestant authorities with John Hick, Maurice Wiles, James P. Mackay and G. W. H. Lampe<sup>28</sup>. Certainly, the Church of Rome would not qualify for the rebuke addressed to his own denomination by G. E. Duffield: "We must face the serious implications of the fact that clerical assent to the Thirty-nine Articles has, during the past century, been so devalued as now to be almost meaningless, and that all idea of doctrinal discipline within the Church of England seems to be abandoned". While evangelicals have either marshalled their forces at the frontiers with (16th century) Catholicism, or fought various civil wars among themselves, little has been done to defend the citadel: "Jesus Christ *Himself* being the chief corner-stone" (Eph. 2:20).

### The function of creeds

As we have seen, many of the fundamental doctrines of Christianity have been expressed in the great creeds of the Church. But subscription to these creeds should never be imposed only on the Church's office-bearers. This goes back to the New Testament itself where the criteria applied to baptisands are clearly not the same as those applied to ordinands. The Church baptised novices. But it would not ordain them (1 Tim. 3:6). Those being baptised professed only, "Jesus is Lord!" or, "Jesus is the Son of God!" But

deacons "must hold the mystery of the faith with pure conscience" (1 Tim. 3:9). The presbyter/bishop must be "apt to teach" (1 Tim. 3:2) and "hold firm to the sure word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to confute those who contradict it (Titus 1:9). The existence of some form of creed for teachers is clearly hinted at in the words of Paul to Timothy: "Follow the pattern of the sound words which you have heard from me, in the faith and love which is in Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 1:13).

Such creeds have a three-fold function.

First, they serve as *confessions* in which particular churches or denominations announce to others and to the world their understanding of Christianity. It may be argued, of course, that, "The Bible, the Bible, alone, is the religion of Protestants." But sometimes we must face the question, "Yes, but how do you understand the Bible?" and give our answer in the form of a succinct statement of our beliefs with regard to the main articles of religion. At this level, the publication of a creed is simply one form of the Church's preaching.

Secondly, creeds are *standards* of orthodoxy. This is particularly true of the shorter creeds such as the Nicene which deal not with the broad spectrum of Christian truths but with a limited number of disputed and controverted points (for example, the deity of Christ). The formulators of the Nicene Creed made no attempt to give a balanced account of Christianity. They simply wanted to draft a statement on the deity of Christ which no Arian or semi-Arian could sign. The later Reformation creeds contained a good deal of non-controversial matter on such topics as effectual calling, adoption and sanctification, but even they were drafted with the conscious intention of excluding from the ministry those who held to the heretical teachings of Arius, Apollinarius, Nestorius, Eutyches, Rome, Socinus and Arminius. Were we drafting such standards today, we would consider further exclusions — for example, Darwinism, Kenoticism and, possibly Pentecostalism. At this point we have to bear in mind that just as not all truths are fundamental, so not all errors are heresies.

---

### **Other things being equal, it is better to leave a doctrine an open question than to exclude a brother from the fellowship.**

---

Thirdly, creeds serve as *symbols* of union (which is why the specialised study of creeds is sometimes called *symbolics*). Even as standards they had this function: heresy has to be excluded because it divides. The creeds defined the limits of theological pluralism. Positively, they indicated the area of doctrinal agreement between particular Christians. Nicea, Chalcedon and Westminster all declared: "These are the doctrines on which we are all agreed." Obviously, the larger the number of such doctrines the better: a church has no real unity if all it can confess corporately is "Jesus is Lord!". On the other hand, to extend the number of doctrines in a symbol beyond the range of the fundamentals is to run the risk of shedding many true believers who do not see some esoteric points of truth exactly as we do. Other things being equal, it is better to leave a doctrine an open question than to exclude a brother from the fellowship.

### **Pentecostalism**

There is one final issue to be faced in connection with the function of doctrine as a mark of the Church. Where do the peculiar doctrines of Pentecostalism and neo-Pentecostalism stand on the theological scale? This is an area where we cannot appeal to the past. We must do our own thinking.

It is important to make some distinctions here. Tongue-speaking is not itself a decisive criterion. So far as we can

see it was not intended to be permanent, it disappeared from the Church for centuries and it would now be impossible to identify it with any certainty. On the other hand, the early believers did speak in tongues and it would be unwarranted to make the mere practice of this "gift" a basis for exclusion.

The real problem lies in two other areas: Holy Spirit baptism and prophesying. Union with Pentecostals would involve having these doctrines imposed on us as fundamentals and this is an imposition we simply could not accept. The view that Holy Spirit baptism is restricted to certain believers is hardly asserted in Scripture to be fundamental, nor is it revealed repeatedly and unambiguously, nor is it one on which all Christians have been agreed. In fact, it is in its very nature anti-evangelical, implying that we can be believers, and be in Christ, and still lack the very promise of God. When we are told, in addition, that it is something that we must earn (by whatever process) we are back in pure legalism.

So far as prophecy is concerned, much depends on how it is defined: if prophets are simply expositors under another name, there is no problem. But if their pretended role is to deliver special revelations, their claims are an outright challenge to the Protestant view of Scripture, according to which nothing is to be added to the Bible "whether by new revelations of the Spirit or traditions of men."<sup>30</sup>

We should note carefully the precise logic of this situation. The question is not whether Pentecostal views on prophecy and Spirit baptism constitute grounds for separation: but whether these views are fundamental and should be safeguarded in any basis of union. Pentecostals would insist that they are fundamental and that they should be safeguarded. I personally find the doctrine of a subsequent Spirit baptism as unacceptable as the doctrine of purgatory: and the ministry of a prophet as repellent as that of a priest.

### **The Sacraments**

The second mark of the Church is the administration of the sacraments according to the will of Christ. Where there are no sacraments there is no Church. The two sacraments, baptism and the Lord's Supper, raise different issues and require separate treatment.

Unity around the Lord's Supper involves three factors. First, agreement as to the elements or symbols used. The Lord, in instituting this sacrament, used bread and *wine*. Many, probably even most, evangelicals today, use unfermented grape juice. This is not a matter of mere convenience or taste on their part. They object in principle to the use of alcohol. Many of us, however, find this scrupulosity deeply disturbing. It not only involves a clear departure from biblical precedent, but implies adverse criticism of the wisdom and integrity of our Lord. The sacrament is not administered according to the mind of Christ if it wilfully departs from His example.

---

### **The second mark of the Church is the administration of the sacraments according to the will of Christ. Where there are no sacraments there is no Church.**

---

Secondly, agreement as to the celebrant. In Catholicism, it is insisted that only a priest, duly ordained in the apostolic succession, can preside at the sacrament and pronounce the words of consecration. Even the Westminster Confession (Chap. XXVII, IV) allowed itself to say that neither sacrament might "be administered by any, but by a minister of the word lawfully ordained". By this standard, the Lord's Supper, as administered in many of the free churches, is at least irregular and possibly invalid. On the other hand, it is very doubtful whether such concepts as

"administering the sacraments" and "lawful ordination" have any meaning by New Testament standards. All that is necessary is that the sacrament be administered "decently and in order".

Thirdly, there must be basic agreement as to the nature of the sacrament itself. Current Roman Catholic thought (or at least Vatican II thought) proposes an ecclesiology which is basically sacramental. A group of believers is a church if it has "the substance of the eucharistic mystery": *ubi eucharistia ibi ecclesia* (where there is the eucharist, there is the church). Yet the Roman Catholic understanding of this sacrament is such that those of Reformed persuasion would find it impossible to engage in any form of joint participation. (Roman Catholicism is equally conscious of the difficulties from its own side). This is why Vatican II's *Decree on Ecumenism* discourages "worship in common", making the enigmatic statement, "The expression of unity very generally forbids common worship").

Many evangelicals would, of course, recoil instinctively from the idea of participating in Holy Communion according to the Roman form. But that does not absolve us from the responsibility of knowing the theological basis of our objection. There are three main difficulties:

1. The question of the *real presence*. This phrase is sometimes used even by Reformed evangelicals but it should be borne in mind that *real* here has its strict etymological meaning: *real presence* is the presence of the 'res' (Latin for *thing*). It means the presence of the *thing itself*, the thing being, in this instance, the body of Christ. In traditional Roman Catholic theology, this presence of the body is asserted literally. The words of consecration by the officiating priest effect a transubstantiation so that the whole substance of the bread is transformed into the whole substance of Christ: body, soul and divinity. To participate in the Mass is to associate wilfully with this doctrine. Despite obvious embarrassment on traditional terminology and elucidation, there is no sign of this doctrine being abated. *The Final Report* of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, written in an eirenic tone as possible, is still declaring: "The elements are not mere signs; Christ's body and blood become really present and are really given" (III 9).
2. The understanding of the Mass as a propitiatory sacrifice. This is a clear element in the theology of the Council of Trent: "Forasmuch as in this divine sacrifice which is celebrated in the Mass, that same Christ is contained and immolated in an unbloody manner who once offered himself in a bloody manner on the altar of the cross: the holy Synod teaches that this sacrifice is truly propitiatory, and that by means thereof this is effected, that we obtain mercy."<sup>31</sup> (The Council of Trent, Twenty-second Session, Chapter II).

More recently, those theologians influenced by Vatican II have shown an inclination not only to mute this emphasis but to subject it to radical re-interpretation. To quote *The Final Report* again: Christ's death on the cross, the culmination of his whole life of obedience, was the one, perfect and sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the world. There can be no repetition of, or addition to what was then accomplished once for all by Christ. Any attempt to express a nexus between the sacrifice of Christ and the eucharist must not obscure this fundamental fact of the Christian faith."<sup>32</sup> Those sentiments are welcome. Nevertheless the formulations of Trent remain the official Catholic position and probably reflect grass-roots opinion far more accurately than the words of the conciliators.

3. The adoration of the host (the *host* being in this case the *hostia* (sacrifice)). "In the holy sacrament of the Eucharist, Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, is to be adored with the worship, even external, of *latría*: and is to be venerated with special festive solemnity and solemnly borne about in procession."<sup>33</sup> (*Latría* is worship in the highest possible sense.)

This is a perfectly logical practice if the doctrine of transubstantiation is correct, because the bread is now God. However, if the bread has not been transubstantiated, it remains bread and any worship offered to it is idolatry.

---

**So far as the New Testament is concerned, the Lord's Supper is duly administered when we seek to fulfil the four-fold intention of the Lord: to give thanks for God's salvation in Him; to commemorate Him; to proclaim Him; and to have communion with Him and His people.**

---

The Roman Catholic doctrine has been massively influential, especially in connection with the question of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper. Let us look briefly at three examples of this influence.

1. **The recent Report, Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry** published by the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches. This document appears to accept unequivocally a literal interpretation of the words, "this is my body". What Christ declared is true, and this truth is fulfilled every time the Eucharist is celebrated. The Church confesses Christ's real, living and active presence in the eucharist. The presence of Christ is clearly the centre of the eucharist, and the promise contained in the words of institution is therefore fundamental to the celebration<sup>34</sup>. Clearly, the eucharistic theology of main-line ecumenism is going to have a strong Roman flavour.
2. **The Doctrine of Martin Luther.** Luther too, took his stand on a literal interpretation of the words, "This is my body". This led to an inevitable insistence on the presence of Christ's body in the Sacrament and to the eventual development within Lutheranism of the doctrine of *consubstantiation* (a word Luther himself did not use). The only difference between this and transubstantiation was that whereas in the latter the bread and wine ceased to exist (leaving only the substance of Christ) in the Lutheran doctrine the bread and wine continued to exist and the body and blood of Christ were present "in with and under" them. In Lutheranism, of course, the doctrine of the presence was not linked with any idea of propitiatory sacrifice, or with the practice of adoring the host. It had, however, profound implications for Christology — every Lord's Day, the body of Christ had to be in thousands of different places at once. This required a doctrine of the ubiquity of the Lord's human nature, arrived at, in turn, by a doctrine of the *communicatio idiomatum* which was peculiarly Lutheran<sup>35</sup>.

Luther's insistence on his doctrine of the corporal presence of Christ in the Eucharist tragically split the Reformation movement. Today, the question is still with us: Does the doctrine of consubstantiation represent such a radical distortion of the biblical teaching as to make it impossible for the Reformed to participate in the Lutheran sacrament?

3. **The teaching of John Calvin.** Calvin never really shook off the legacy of the mediaeval doctrine. He continued to insist on a certain presence of the body of Christ, and a certain influence emanating from that body. The result, according to William Cunningham, was a doctrine which was "about as unintelligible as Luther's consubstantiation"<sup>36</sup>. Few Reformed theologians, however, have analysed Calvin's doctrines as carefully as Cunningham and many have accepted it uncritically, continuing to speak of a real presence and to protest loudly against so-called Zwinglianism and the doctrine that the sacraments are only "naked and bare signs". Calvin's doctrine of the presence of Christ in the Lord's

Supper must never become an article of faith or a term of communion.

So far as the New Testament is concerned, the Lord's Supper is duly administered when we seek to fulfil the four-fold intention of the Lord: to give thanks for God's salvation in Him; to commemorate Him; to proclaim Him; and to have communion with Him and His people.

The question of the Lord's presence in the Sacrament is not raised by the New Testament material itself. Once it is raised, however, we have to say two things, both of them negative: first, that the *body* of Christ is not present in any sense; and, secondly, that the Lord is not present at the Lord's Supper in any *unique* sense. He indwells His people always, He is present with those gathered in His name always, He is present to faith always. He is present in baptism, in preaching and in prayer as really as He is in Holy Communion.

### Baptism

On the face of things, every baptised person should recognise every other baptised person as a Christian. But the situation is complicated by several factors.

First, it is complicated by the doctrine of baptismal regeneration, according to which the mere administration and reception of the sacrament regenerates. This doctrine is so radically anti-evangelical that any basis of union would have to specifically exclude it, using some form of words such as those of the Westminster Confession: "grace and salvation are not so inseparably annexed unto this ordinance as that all that are baptised are undoubtedly regenerated." (Chapter XXVIII, V).

---

### On the face of things, every baptised person should recognise every other baptised person as a Christian. But the situation is complicated by several factors.

---

Secondly, there is the question of the *mode* of baptism. Anglicans and Presbyterians regard the mode as immaterial: it may be by sprinkling, by pouring or by immersion. Baptists insist that it must be by immersion and regard any other mode as invalid.

Thirdly, the problem of the *subjects* of baptism. Anglicans and Presbyterians baptise not only believers but the children of believers. Baptists baptise believers only and regard infant baptism as invalid.

There is no hope of this dispute being resolved. Anglicans and Presbyterians may as well recognise that "You shall have the Baptists with you always." Nor is it possible to gather the two views into one church. If only the mode were in dispute, union might be possible, provided paedobaptists were prepared to accept immersion for the sake of peace (whether they would have a right to sacrifice their freedom in this way is a moot point). But the prevalence of two views as to *who* should be baptised makes organic union impossible. However flexible paedobaptists might be with regard to immersion, they could not abandon the practice of infant-baptism, which they regard as a divine institution. So long as this difference remains, the existence of separate evangelical churches side by side will be a painful and humiliating necessity.

Besides pleading for mutual respect, frequent consultation, co-operation in witness and fellowship in prayer, we may make two special pleas.

First, that Baptists think carefully about the implications of re-baptism. When these things are done remotely and anonymously there is only a minimum of pain. But I would find it impossible to have fellowship with a church which insisted on re-baptising members of my own. The act is fundamentally schismatic because it says that paedobaptist churches are not valid churches and paedobaptist ministers are not valid ministers (how can a man be "ordained" before he is baptised?). The correct course would be for baptist churches to recognise that if the rest of us baptise infants, then *we* shall answer to God. Otherwise, they must accept that every baptism of unbelievers (including, surely, many baptists) is invalid; and, more painfully, that they can have meaningful ecumenical relations only with other baptist churches.

The other plea is that paedobaptists abandon the practice of indiscriminate baptism. We have no right to baptise the children of any but believers, and baptists are fully justified in regarding the current practice of many Presbyterians and Anglicans as deeply offensive.

The remaining marks of the Church (discipline, distribution and worship) can be dealt with only cursorily.

### Discipline

This must not be restricted to what is referred to today as "church discipline". The Scottish Second Book of Discipline, for example, is sub-titled, "Heads and Conclusions of the Polity of the Church". When the Reformers and their successors spoke of discipline as a mark of the Church, this is clearly what they had in mind. A true church would have a biblical polity.

Discussion as to what constitutes such a polity is often bedevilled by debate as to the meaning of *office*, *ordination* and such technical terms as *elder*, *bishop*, *deacon* and *evangelist*. It is doubtful if these terms were ever used with the precision our western minds long for: and certain that each separate word does not designate a separate office. It is much more fruitful to ask what ministries the apostolic church was furnished with. The answer appears to be, Three: a ministry of tables (deacons, male and female); a ministry of oversight (pastors, bishops, elders); and a ministry of the word. This last can itself be viewed under two aspects: the ministry of the word for the instruction and edification of the church; and a ministry of the word directed, through aggressive evangelism, to making disciples of all nations. There is no hint, however, that these two forms of word-ministry, although conceptually distinct, involved two separate "offices". But what matters for the moment is that any basis of union will have to make provision for all these forms of ministry. The nomenclature is not important.

Independents and Presbyterians would both argue that at least the main features of their respective polities are laid down in the New Testament. But today neither claims divine right for its own discipline. At least they do not dismiss other bodies as mere sects on the ground of differences in church government. Nor would they insist on the re-ordination of ministers admitted from other communions: or even on a service of reconciliation.

Anglicans and Roman Catholics, however, see things differently. Romanists have serious reservations about Anglican orders and Anglicans have serious reservations about the orders of the free churches. Even an eclectic, ecumenical document such as the *Report on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* clearly expects any future ecclesiastical alignments to be episcopal. "The threefold ministry", it says, "of bishop, presbyter and deacon may serve today as an expression of the unity we seek and also as a means for achieving it."<sup>37</sup> Again: "Churches which lack the episcopal succession are asked to realise that the continuity with the church of the apostles finds profound expression in the successive laying on of hands by bishops and that, though they may not lack the continuity of the apostolic tradition, this sign will strengthen and deepen that continuity"<sup>38</sup> (ibid, p. 496). *The Report of the Conversations between the Church of England and the Methodist Church* is even more explicit (p. 24): "It seems obvious that unity is best expressed in one man as a permanent official representative. This does not necessarily point to papacy, though a permanent primacy of a bishop amongst his fellows is not incompatible with

biblical principles, provided no unscriptural claims are made for him."

What all this amounts to is that it is a virtual presupposition of current ecumenical dialogue that episcopacy is to be taken for granted. This is obviously unacceptable to Reformed evangelicals.

1. Virtually no one today claims New Testament sanction for monarchical episcopacy. Even its most ardent exponents claim only that it emerged in the late second century as a logical, Spirit-led development from apostolic times. How can it be claimed that an office which did not even exist in the New Testament is of the essence of the Church?
2. Episcopacy as we know it today contradicts some of the essential principles of New Testament polity: for instance, the plurality of presbyters/bishops in each congregation; and the parity of all presbyters/bishops.
3. There is no evidence that episcopacy has served to maintain either unity or orthodoxy. Its re-imposition in 1666 led, in fact, to the irrevocable break-up of the Church of England; and recent experience shows only too clearly that bishops themselves can be false teachers.
4. Logically, episcopacy is only a mid-point. If we want a focus and a symbol of unity, a Pope is the only final answer.
5. Despite all the protestations that bishops (and popes) are only ministers and servants, it would be foolish to ignore the evidence of history to the contrary. They have too often lorded it over God's heritage.
6. Even in terms of symbolism, they have conveyed to the world a completely wrong image of the Church. Lambeth Palace is not the symbol of service and self-denial but of self-assertion and triumphalism.

To say the least, then, in any discussion on the polity of a future united Church episcopacy could claim no special favours. To hold to it intransigently would simply mean putting up a barrier to all ecumenical advance. We would certainly find it difficult to make the concession made by J. M. Ross (then of the Presbyterian Church of England): "It is unrealistic to suppose that in England a united church could be other than episcopal, with a ministry in the 'Apostolic Succession'<sup>39</sup>."

### Church censures

As we have seen, discipline, in the language of the Reformers and their successors, was wider than what we mean by church discipline today. Yet in the narrow sense, referring to church censures, it was also an important mark of the Church. The First Book of Discipline (Chapter IX) is typical: "As no commonwealth can flourish or long endure without good laws and sharp execution of the same, so neither can the kirk of God be brought to purity, neither yet be retained in the same, without the order of ecclesiastical discipline."

There are three points to be borne in mind.

First, church censures must be directed against sins specifically defined as such by Scripture. The Church's authority is ministerial. We do not make the laws. We merely apply them. To pronounce sinful what Christ has not pronounced sinful is to go beyond our remit and act as tyrants.

Secondly, Church censures must be based on clear evidence. The Church must scrupulously avoid infringing natural justice, and rumour and hearsay should count for even less in a "church court" than they would in a civil one.

Thirdly, it must never be forgotten that Church censures are intended to be restorative, not punitive. They are instruments of pastoral care, aimed at bringing sinners to repentance, not engines of judicial retribution.

Church discipline is probably the weakest area in the modern church and it is fatally easy to turn the apparent absence of this mark into an excuse for leaving the church. We should think very carefully about this, however. Discipline was very lax in the church at Corinth and in the Seven Churches of Asia. Yet neither Paul when writing to the former, nor the Lord when speaking to the latter, ever suggests secession. According to Calvin, our indulgence ought to extend much further in tolerating imperfection of conduct than in tolerating imperfection of doctrine. "If the holy prophets" he writes, "felt no obligation to withdraw from the church on account of the very numerous and heinous crimes, not of one or two individuals, but almost of the whole people, we arrogate too much to ourselves, if we presume forthwith to withdraw from the communion of the church, because the lives of all accord not with our judgment or even with the Christian profession."<sup>40</sup>

### Worship

It is the Westminster Confession which defines worship as one of the marks of the Church: "Particular churches are more or less pure according as ... public worship is performed as more or less purely in them". (Chapter XXV. IV).

---

### The whole Christian life is an act of worship, in which, as priests, we offer ourselves as sacrifices to God.

---

There is one difficulty to be noted in connection with this mark: the distinctive New Testament words for worship (*leiturgēo sebatōo*) are not used in connection with the public gatherings of the church. When they are used, they apply to the day-to-day lives of ordinary Christians. This should make us wary of drawing sharp distinctions between the secular and the sacred and between public and private worship. The whole Christian life is an act of worship, in which, as priests, we offer ourselves as sacrifices to God.

On the other hand, the various components of what we commonly regard as worship are associated with the public gatherings of the church. There is glory to God *in the church* throughout all ages (Eph. 3:21). The gathered church sings psalms and hymns (1 Cor. 14:26). The gathered church prays. The gathered church receives instruction. The gathered church breaks bread.

The New Testament suggests three criteria of worship.

First, is it in the truth? Is it directed to God, biblically conceived, and to Christ as represented in the Gospel? The concern here is not merely with orthodoxy but with authenticity. Real worship is in the vertical, designed not to impress a human audience but to please the living God.

Secondly, is it in the Spirit? At one level this is enquiring as to the sincerity, cordiality and spontaneity of our worship. It can so easily become a lifeless form. But there is a deeper challenge, too. Is our worship charismatic, arising out of a real experience of the Spirit's leading and guidance and out of the gifts which He has bestowed upon the congregation?

Thirdly, is the worship conducted decently and in order? If on the one hand there should be no stiff formality, neither, on the other should there be confusion. The criterion here may very well be the outsider (1 Cor. 14:23). What will he think? Will he think that we are mad?

### Distribution

What the Second Book of Discipline calls "distributions" we today would call the ministry of compassion. The Christian Church was organised for such a ministry from the very beginning, directing its energies towards the sick, the widows and the victims of famine.

Four points deserve to be noticed.

First, the primary beneficiaries under this ministry were the members of the household of faith. (Gal. 6:10).

Secondly, believers were also directed to do good to all men. (Gal. 6:10).

Thirdly, there was in the early Church (Acts 6:1ff) a group of functionaries (the seven "deacons") whose specific duty it was to attend to this ministry. They were chosen from among the most gifted members of the community.

Finally, most of what we are told in the New Testament about Christian giving (for example 2 Cor. 8:1ff), relates not to meeting the internal needs of the church but to providing for those who are destitute.

Obviously, this ministry is an essential aspect of the life of the Church. A church which lacks it is radically unfaithful to the New Testament norm.

### Perfectionist ecclesiology

The function of these notes or marks of the Church is clearly defined in the Westminster Confession. They are indicators of the relative purity of churches: "Particular churches are more or less pure according as the doctrine of the gospel is taught and embraced, ordinances administered and public worship performed more or less purely in them." (Chapter XXV. IV).

But in this very same context we have a salutary reminder that "the purest churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error." There are signs among Reformed evangelicals today of a tendency towards a perfectionist ecclesiology. Men act as if it were possible to have a church composed only of true believers and served by elders of only the highest calibre. Men separate in high dudgeon when they discover their churches less than perfect. In actual fact, the choice facing us is not between pure and impure churches, but between churches marked by varying degrees of impurity. All churches are composed of ungodly men who need, individually and collectively, to be justified by grace. "Sometimes," said James Durham, "the Lord in His providence will order so that there is no side can be chosen without inconveniences." Durham's "Sometimes" is unnecessary. There are always "inconveniences": but these must not become an excuse for ignoring the mandatory of union between Christians and churches. To quote Durham again: "By way of precept there is an absolute necessity of uniting laid upon the church, so that it falleth not under debate as a principle whether a church should continue divided or united, more than it falleth under debate whether there should be preaching." And he adds: We must have union "with many things defective that need forbearance in persons that are united."<sup>41</sup>

The situation facing us today is no less confused than it was in Durham's time. Whether we are contemplating joining a local church or leading our churches into wider ecclesiastical union, "no side can be chosen without inconveniences". If we have the effrontery to say, "I am rich and need nothing," then the Lord will spew us out of His mouth.

### Esse and bene esse

Reformed theologians have often distinguished between those things which are necessary to the *esse* (being) of a church and those things which are necessary only to its *bene esse* (well-being). James Bannerman<sup>42</sup> is typical: "There is much that may be necessary to the perfection of a Church that is not necessary to the existence of a Church in such a sense that the want of it would exclude it from the title or privileges of a Church at all."

This distinction is similar to the one already drawn between primary and secondary doctrines. We cannot use it to distinguish the marks from one another in terms of their relative importance. There is no hierarchy of marks.

With the possible (but improbable) exception of *distributions*, all the marks are essential. The Great Commission itself requires preaching, preachers and baptism. The Church can hardly exist without worshipping; and it has no right to disregard the poor (Gal. 2:10).

The distinction can only operate *within* the marks. Indeed as we have made our way rapidly through the marks all we have focussed on has been the essence: what are *fundamental* doctrines, what is the *essence* of the sacraments, of polity, of worship and of the ministry of compassion? Within each mark, there are essentials and non-essentials. But each mark is essential.

The important thing now is that Christians who bear the marks (not perfectly but authentically) should recognise, love and serve one another: and that churches which bear the marks (again, not perfectly, but authentically) should, whenever possible, unite; and even where that is not possible, "stand together, contending with one mind for the faith of the gospel."

### Notes

- 1) Calvin, *Institutes* IV.1.2 (London, James Clarke & Co. Ltd., 1962).
- 2) Owen, *Works*, (London, The Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), Vol. XVI, p. 189.
- 3) Hodge, *The Church and Its Polity* (London, 1879) p. 89.
- 4) *The New Face of Evangelicalism* (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1976) p. 133.
- 5) Calvin, *Theological Treatises* (The Library of Christian Classics, Vol. XXII: London, SCM Press, 1954) p. 109.
- 6) *Ibid.*, p. 241.
- 7) *Ibid.*, p. 249.
- 8) *Institutes*, IV.1.12.
- 9) *The Reformation of the Church*, Ed. Iain H. Murray (London, The Banner of Truth Trust, 1965) p. 314.
- 10) Christopher Butler, *The Theology of Vatican II* (London, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1981), p. 125.
- 11) *Institutes*, IV.1.12.
- 12) *Ibid.*, IV.11.1.
- 13) *Ibid.*, IV.1.12.
- 14) Quoted in Walker, *Scottish Theology and Theologians* (2nd edition, r.i. Knox Press, Edinburgh, 1982) p. 100.
- 15) *Works*, Vol. XVI, p. 179
- 16) *Historical Theology* (London, The Banner of Truth Trust, 1960) Vol. II, p. 503.
- 17) *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 24
- 18) *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 184.
- 19) *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 321.
- 20) *Ibid.*, p. 502.
- 21) *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation* (London, The Banner of Truth Trust, 1967), p. 598.
- 22) *A Treatise of Miscellany Questions* (Re-printed in *The Presbyterian's Armoury*, Vol. I: Edinburgh, 1846) Chapter IX.
- 23) *The Westminster Confession*, Chapter I. VIII.
- 24) *Colloquia Peripatetica* (Edinburgh, 1871) p. 59.
- 25) *The Church and Its Polity*, p. 90.
- 26) *Colloquia Peripatetica*, p. 58.
- 27) Kung, *on Being a Christian* (London, Collins, 1977); Schillebeeckx *Jesus* (London, Collins, 1983).
- 28) *The Myth of God Incarnate*, Ed. John Hick (London, SCM Press, 1979); Lampe, *God As Spirit* (Oxford, The Clarendon Press, 1977); Mackey *Jesus: The Man and the Myth* (London, SCM Press, 1979).
- 29) *All in Each Place: Towards Reunion in England*, Ed. J. I. Packer (Appleford, The Marcham Manor press, 1965).
- 30) *The Westminster Confession*, I. VI.
- 31) *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, Twenty-second Session, Chapter II.
- 32) *The Final Report*, II.5. *The Final Report* is published in *Growth in Agreement* (Geneva, The World Council of Churches, 1984).
- 33) *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, Thirteenth Session, Canon VI.
- 34) *Growth in Agreement*, p. 478.
- 35) See A. B. Bruce, *The Humiliation of Christ* (Edinburgh, 1876), Lecture III.
- 36) *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation*, p. 240.
- 37) *Growth in Agreement*, p. 485.
- 38) *Ibid.*, p. 496.
- 39) *All in Each Place*, p. 233.
- 40) *Institutes*, IV.1.18.
- 41) *The Reformation of the Church*, p. 359f.
- 42) *The Church of Christ* (London, The Banner of Truth Trust, 1960) Vol. I, p. 55f.