

# Towards a Confession for Tomorrow's Church

J. I. PACKER

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AFTER THE COLLAPSE of the Anglican-Methodist union scheme, one might have expected that a considerable breathing-space would be called for before any further attempts of this kind were made. However, following an outburst of unitive zeal at an interdenominational conference in Oxford last January, the United Reformed Church has now issued, and the General Synod has accepted, an invitation to explore between now and next summer, along with the Baptist, Methodist and Roman Catholic Churches and members of the Free Church Federal Council, whether negotiations for organic union in England should not recommence.<sup>1</sup> It is clear that many will shout 'aye', and whatever be thought of the long-term wisdom of their view it may well prevail. The Church of England, therefore, may soon find itself selecting yet another commission to devise yet another scheme. It seems certain that any such scheme will be a one-stage affair, in the sense that a constitution for a united Church will be drawn up at the start, as in all other union schemes elsewhere in the world. It seems certain too that Roman Catholic dioceses in England could not at present participate in such a venture, but the Roman presence and long-term ecumenical hopes will be permanent and potent factors in the developing situation. So the question of a basis of faith for a united non-Roman body which will be exploring possibilities of rapprochement with Roman Catholics from the moment of its formation may soon become a live issue. Clearly, it is to nobody's advantage if this question comes up in inter-church discussion without it having been first explored within the participating bodies; it is a matter on which it would be ruinous for negotiators to take a line which turned out not to command general assent, and it is too important and complex to admit of being settled on the spur of the moment. This article, therefore, seeks to open up the issue and consider how it might best be approached if and when it arises.

*I Creeds and Confessional Statements: Some Basic Principles*

CREEDS, confessions, articles, declarations and bases of faith, and forms for instruction in faith (catechisms) are found in most churches. Why is this so? Why should such documents be thought necessary or valuable? The answer lies in the contribution they make to the fulfilment of the church's four basic tasks—worshipping and witnessing, teaching and guarding the faith. These statements have, broadly speaking, a fourfold function, doxological, declarative, didactic and disciplinary. Their doxological function is to glorify God by setting forth his works of love and putting into words a responsive commitment. Their declarative function is to announce what the communities that espouse them stand for, and so to identify those communities as belonging to Christ's church, the worldwide fellowship of faith. Their didactic function is to serve as a basis for instruction. Their disciplinary function is to establish the limits of belief within which each confessing body wishes to stay, and so to lay a foundation for whatever forms of doctrinal restriction or direction it may see fit to impose on its clerical and lay members. Without authorised doctrinal formulae (*standards*, as Presbyterians have historically called them) the church is clearly at a disadvantage for maintaining its character as 'the pillar and bulwark of the truth' (1 Tim. 3:15). Granted, no human formula of faith is complete or final; yet formularies can be true as far as they go, and very useful for excluding false trails and helping each generation to fulfil the task of making as clear as possible what Christianity really is.

Ours is an age of doctrinal unsettlement in which Western culture is drifting away from its historic Christian moorings into a secularised pluriformity. In such an age, theological interest rightly focuses on the quest for new ways of stating and explicating the old faith to people for whom conventional ways of putting it have lost credibility, and those who identify with this quest find it easy to overlook the abiding value of authorised doctrinal statements. Formularies are viewed with a jaundiced eye as shoes that pinch the intellectually enterprising, and their stock falls. This has happened in the Church of England in a very obvious way. The formularies of the Church of England are the 39 Articles, the Book of Common Prayer (including the Apostles', Nicene and Athanasian Creeds, and the Catechism), the Ordinal, and the Homilies. The Articles are today widely thought of as a burden rather than a blessing, a dated witness to convictions by which Anglicans no longer feel bound. Similarly the Athanasian Creed's damnatory clauses, Nicene and Chalcedonian preciseness, and local Western provenance, plus its sheer length, have for decades put it under a cloud, while the Homilies have long been both out of print and out of mind. Whatever else the Revised Catechism has done, it has effectively diverted attention from the Prayer Book Catechism.

For many Anglicans, the services of 'our incomparable Prayer Book' (the phrase was common before the last war) have ceased to carry conviction either as living liturgy or as a rule of living faith, while the two ecumenical creeds are downgraded to the category of Christian gang songs, to be sung as a loyal toast rather than recited as declarations of factual truth. The factors which have sent our formularies into eclipse in this way are easy to see—the fading of belief in verbal or conceptual revelation; the psychologising of faith as a 'feeling' or attitude, to be described in terms of itself rather than of its object; knowledge of the logical and epistemological obstacles to finding precise, testable meanings in Christian assertions; awareness that all historic statements about historic facts are historically conditioned, and therefore relative and not final; ecumenically-prompted distaste for being reminded of old divisions; and a lax approach to clerical subscription whereby the Church's leading officers have set an example of not taking formularies of faith quite seriously.<sup>2</sup> Nor have these factors operated only among Anglicans; all the older churches, more or less, have felt the force of them and show their effects.

But is the modern tendency to depreciate confessional formularies and wish them away good or bad?—encouraging or depressing?—mature or neurotic?—healthy and invigorating or aberrant and weakening? The following facts seem to suggest an answer:

1. Christianity is a faith which rests on the 'there-ness' of the God and Christ of the Bible, the decisiveness of the Creator's redemptive action in history, and the givenness of the work and message of sovereign grace. The church has always known this. Accordingly, its formularies and creeds have, and always had, as their purpose to keep it facing these realities on which its existence depends, and in terms of which its life of worship, witness and service must be lived, and to ward off threatening distortions of vital truth. Creedal statements, whatever their form, are thus testimonies to faithfulness today and aids to faithfulness tomorrow.

2. The contrast sometimes drawn between Reformation confessions of faith such as the Articles, and patristic products like the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds and the Chalcedonian definition, is misleading. It does not follow that because the former are long and controversial while the latter, in form at any rate, are short and positive, therefore they are two different kinds of animal. Differences in their outward form and circumstances must not blind us to their inward unity of substance and purpose. Both aim to confess Christ against views which in some way or other deny or dishonour him, and so to express and safeguard the unity and purity of the Christian faith against inroads of heresy. The basic relation between them is one of continuity and development: the Reformation statements supplement the patristic by drawing out the soteriology and ecclesiology which they imply, just as the Nicene Creed supplements the Apostles', and the Athanasian the

Nicene, by amplified definitions of the Trinity and Incarnation.<sup>3</sup> Gustav Aulen argues that the archetypal New Testament confession and the derivative confessions of the patristic and Reformation periods demonstrably correspond. The New Testament confession of Jesus as Lord centred upon four truths—Jesus lives, the risen Master; Jesus died for sins on the cross; Jesus will come again, finally to save his people; and Jesus is God the Son, co-creator with his Father. The patristic confession, organised round the thought of Jesus as God incarnate and so as divine Saviour, centred upon the same four points, guarding them against docetism (the Apostles' Creed) and Arianism (the Nicene Creed). The Reformation confession of Jesus as the one in and through whom sinners are justified by faith alone and saved by sovereign grace was an elucidation and defence of the same apostolic confession, this time against a semi-Pelagian doctrine of salvation by meritorious churchmanship.<sup>4</sup> If an Anglican may be allowed to agree with a Lutheran, this is surely the right way to view the matter. Patristic and Reformation creedal statements, though historically of disparate authority, should nevertheless be taken with equal seriousness, and there is no principle on which an Anglican can consistently embrace the former while discounting the latter as of no importance: for both witness, in complementary ways, to the one Christ.

3. The church today is outwardly divided, but the segments are seeking to draw closer together. In this situation, the responsibility of each national or denominational church to make its doctrinal commitment explicit is redoubled. Unless in this way it carries a theological identity-card showing what it stands for, it cannot make good its claim to catholicity (for catholicity is before anything else a maintaining of the fulness of the apostolic faith),<sup>5</sup> nor can it converse responsibly with the Church of Rome, the weightiest participant lined up for tomorrow's ecumenical discussions; for the Roman Church has a very definite doctrinal commitment, of which it makes no bones, nor is ever likely to, and naturally wants to know with equal definiteness what theological commitment each Protestant church maintains. Roman Catholics make no secret of their perplexity at the way modern Anglicans shuffle when asked this question; it is important, therefore, both as an aid to meaningful exchange and simply as good manners, that this sense of vagueness be dispelled for good and all.

4. Until very recently the Church of England regularly used its formularies as tools for instruction. Children and adolescents learned the Catechism and the contents of the Prayer Book, and clergy and adult layfolk studied the Articles also. The textbooks of Burnet or Browne,<sup>6</sup> along with Pearson on the Creed and Hooker on the establishment, were for much of the nineteenth century the ordinary clergyman's staple doctrinal diet. During the past hundred years, commentaries on the Articles for ordinands and clergy by T. P. Boulton (5th edition, 1880), G. F. Maclear and W. W. Williams (1896), E. C. S.

Gibson (1897), B. J. Kidd (5th edition, 1911), E. J. Bicknell (1919; 3rd edition, revised by H. J. Carpenter, 1955), and W. H. Griffith Thomas (*The Principles of Theology*, 1930), plus treatments of them for churchmen generally such as those by K. N. Ross (1957), W. G. Wilson and J. H. Templeton (*Anglican Teaching*, 1962), and D. B. Knox (1967), have shown a sustained concern that the witness of the Articles to Christian truth should be known and appreciated.<sup>7</sup> In the light of this, and of current opinion as one meets it, it would seem that the desire to put away the Articles is a minority view among Anglicans, going very often with ignorance of their contents. Most Anglicans, it seems, regret current wildness and woolliness of opinion among churchmen, and without wishing to restrict anyone's freedom of enquiry are hoping to see a return by the Church as a whole to the definiteness of the Creeds and Articles, as a step demanded by both the truth and the times.

These facts surely show that the prevalent coolness towards credal formulae should be regarded as an imbalance, temporary one hopes, and certainly not as a model for the line tomorrow's united church, if such there be, should take.

It is not, of course, denied, nor could it be, that by adopting credal statements churches involve themselves in problems, and it is important to be aware what these are. There is, first, the problem of *interpretation*. The body adopting these statements must be granted the right, as it will on occasion find itself called to the task, of interpreting them and pronouncing on others' interpretation of them, both within and outside its own fellowship. But what are the principles for determining what they mean, what they include and exclude, approve or disallow? Like all public documents, they must be understood in terms of the natural sense of their words, and within this limit they must be construed *ex animo imponentis*, i.e. in terms of the mind of the framer so far as this can be known from other sources. Therefore they have to be contextualised historically, and this is often a subtle and demanding specialist task which may issue, when the documents are old, in the disconcerting discovery that they leave open questions which they were previously thought to have settled.<sup>8</sup> The debates that inevitably surround this process can easily create the feeling that confessional statements only cause trouble, and we should be better off without them.

Again, ecclesiastically authorised credal statements create problems of *discipline*. Granted that (*pace* Rome) none of them may claim infallibility, and that churchmen's consciences are bound primarily to Scripture and only to formularies so far as they are seen to square with Scripture, the question remains: how far, and by what means, should a church seek to impose conformity to its creed upon its members? What should be done when (as always happens sooner or later) individuals, lay and ordained, reveal that they cannot give unqualified

assent to the official standards? What degree of commitment to those standards should be required as a condition of being ordained or admitted to a pastoral charge? Historically, practice here has varied from a demand for *ex animo* assent with a heresy charge in prospect should one subsequently defect (a hard line which goes back through the churches of the Reformation to the Council of Nicaea) to a conscientious refusal to treat any testimony to the church's faith as a norm, or to have anyone subscribe it, lest the Spirit's ministry of teaching the church new truth should hereby be obstructed (a reaction against post-Nicene practice, going back to the Baptists and Independents of the seventeenth century). Most churches requiring clerical assent to statements of faith now make it clear in one way or another that the assent need only be 'general', but this is an unclear notion and borderline problems abound. Knowledge of the existing range of practice, and of the perplexities which both enforcing and not enforcing assent involve (how to avoid coercing consciences in the one case and betraying the truth in the other) easily prompts the wish that no creedal statements were ever authorised at all.

Thirdly, confessions create, in addition to a problem of discipline for the church, a problem of *integrity* for the individual. What are the ethics of subscription or of any sort of commitment to a body with a confessional basis? What liberty of interpretation and exploration, what right to follow arguments whither they lead, and what openness to have the Bible change my views, is left to me by such a commitment? Though in practice most churches allow a fair latitude to private doctrinal speculation, sensitive souls are often bothered as to whether enquiry along this or that line is really consistent with their existing doctrinal ties while others are bewildered to see how loose some sit to the standards by which they are officially bound. These situations are prolific in pain and distrust, and once more it is tempting to conclude that creeds are more of a nuisance than they are worth.

Finally, confessional statements can be *misunderstood* and *abused*. If orthodoxy is equated with faith and Christian witness with defending the creed, there is a degree of misunderstanding; if loyalty to the confession is held to entail maintaining the divisions between Christians that the confession reflects, irrespective of whether the terms of debate have changed, there is a real misuse. Yet these mistakes, as we know, get made, prompting yet again the thought that without creeds and confessions we might be better off.

But, just as problems of adjustment within all monogamous marriages (often the hardest relational problems that people ever face) do not discredit and should not overthrow the institution itself, whatever the prophets of Women's Lib and the Playboy philosophers may say, so the problems involved in having church confessions are no argument for abolishing them. Three considerations at least show them to be vital.

First, the New Testament insists that faith, understood as total trust in the whole Christ, has an intellectual content. We only know God in Christ through knowing about him, and therefore the 'sound doctrine' of the gospel, the conceptual form and pattern of apostolic truth, must be held and taught faithfully in the churches. So every Christian generation is responsible for formulating the faith with as much precision as is needed to guard it against distortion and syncretism at fundamental level, and this is where official creedal statements fit in.

Second, it is the Holy Spirit who teaches God's people how to confess the faith in face of opposition, according to the promise of Matthew 10:19f. In the church's corporate judgment as to what the biblical faith involves, and what needs asserting in face of particular errors, we should see the influence of the third Person of the Trinity, the church's divine teacher. Creeds, though necessarily incomplete and provisional (for perfect knowledge belongs to heaven, not earth), and certainly not infallible, as was said before, are products of the Spirit's teaching, guides to and preliminary accounts of the biblical message, and hence means whereby one generation of Christians may learn from another, as the *koinonia* of the Spirit requires us all to do. Other churches (Lutheran, Reformed, Roman Catholic) have recognised this and therefore taken *symbolics* (the study of creeds) into their theological curriculum; one could wish that the Church of England was as wise. For us to study past attempts to confess the biblical faith is a basic way to learn from the Spirit today; and for us to be willing to confess the faith again, in face of contemporary error, is a basic way of honouring and obeying the Spirit in our time.<sup>9</sup>

Third, one dimension of catholicity is a biblical comprehensiveness; and this can only be achieved through defining correctly the community's doctrinal bounds. Abolish those bounds, and the church dissolves into the world.

All this has special relevance to any united church that is to be formed out of existing ecclesiastical bodies. Where the Bible justifies the beliefs which those bodies hold at present, continuity of faith between the uniting churches and the united church must be firmly established by a definite endorsement and confession of those beliefs, otherwise catholicity is forfeit. Why so? First, because the united body would then demonstrably not be holding the fulness of faith as the uniting bodies knew it; second, because, as Roger Beckwith observes in his valuable chapter, 'The Problem of Doctrinal Standards', in *All in each Place*,<sup>10</sup> without doctrinal formularies the visible unity of any church 'could only be held to lie in some secondary matter such as a certain form of polity. But this would provide a unity essentially sectarian. Genuine catholicity requires unity of faith, and for this unity of government is no substitute'.

So we conclude that as creedless Christianity is a contradiction in terms, so is a professed church without a creedal commitment; and to

resolve the problems of having such commitment by abandoning it would be like amputating one's leg to cure one's bunions. As this would be intolerable in the Church of England today, so it would be intolerable in a united church tomorrow.

## II *Doctrinal Arrangements in Union Schemes outside England*

ANY forthcoming united church in England then, must have an adequate confession. What precedents have we to guide us in seeking one? This section reviews the doctrinal arrangements in some of the main union schemes put forward during the past thirty years. Those under review may conveniently be classified as:

(a) The India-Africa group, consisting of the Church of South India (CSI), the Church of North India and Pakistan (CNI/P), the Church of Lanka (L), and the so far abortive schemes for Nigeria (N) and Ghana (G), which were largely based on the plans for India and Ceylon. The documentary links between these five schemes, and more particularly the latter four, are close, obvious and admitted. Anglicans are involved in them all.<sup>11</sup>

(b) Three schemes drawing on material from group (a) and other sources: the Australian scheme, involving Methodists, Presbyterians and Congregationalists, which was set out in *The Church: its Nature, Function and Ordering . . . together with the Proposed Basis of Union* (1964) (Au); the nine-denomination American scheme set out in *A Plan of Union* (1970) (COCU, initial letters of Consultation on Church Union); and the Canadian scheme set out in *The Study Guide: The Principles of Union between the Anglican Church in Canada and the United Church of Canada* (n.d., ?1966). Anglicans are involved in the last two; the first proposed (abortively, as it turned out) to receive the historic episcopate from CSI.

(c) The New Zealand scheme (NZ), which involves Anglicans but in several ways stands apart from (a) and (b). It is the only one on our list in which the doctrinal basis has been a matter of major controversy within the negotiating churches, and its doctrinal proposals seem to reflect the hardest work.<sup>12</sup> Its future is doubtful, as is that of the Lanka, Australian, Canadian and American schemes, but in no case are doctrinal difficulties now the main problem, unless one counts suspicion of others' doctrinal intentions as a doctrinal difficulty.

1. *Doctrinal standards in group (a)*. The doctrinal platform characteristic of this group of schemes contains the following seven elements:

(i) *The Holy Scriptures* are affirmed to contain all things necessary to salvation and to be the supreme and decisive standard of faith, by which the church must always be ready to correct and reform itself (CSI; N; G; CNI/P, adding the description of Scripture as 'the inspired Word of God'; L, in a weak and shortened form which, as Leslie



Newbigin points out, 'seems to make Scripture entirely the creature of the Church',<sup>13</sup> and makes no reference to future reformation).

(ii) *The Apostles' and Nicene Creeds* are accepted as witnessing to and safeguarding the faith which the Scriptures set forth (CSI; CNI/P; L; N; G). L and G add that these Creeds are 'a sufficient statement of that faith to be a basis of union', an echo of Note (i) in the CSI statement on 'The Faith of the Church' in its Basis of Union (not in its Constitution). In its total thrust, however, this Note is cool and indeed cagey towards the Creeds, for it reads thus:

The uniting Churches accept the *fundamental truths embodied in the Creeds* named above as providing a sufficient basis of union; but do not intend thereby to demand the assent of individuals to *every word and phrase* in them, or to exclude *reasonable liberty of interpretation*, or to assert that those Creeds are a *complete expression* of the Christian faith (my italics).

Each element in this statement is no doubt defensible in terms of the high view of the Creeds, as witnessing faithfully to the realities of saving revelation, which this present article assumes; nonetheless, it sounds very negative, and understandably gave much offence at the time of CSI's birth.<sup>14</sup> More positively, L requires either the Apostles' or the Nicene Creed to be used in confirmation preparation, and CNI/P notes their doxological and declarative function ('The use of the Creeds in worship is an act of adoration and thanksgiving toward Almighty God for his nature and for his acts of love and mercy, as well as a joyful affirmation of the faith which binds together the worshippers').

(iii) *The Trinitarian faith* is summarised in this style: 'The uniting Churches hold the faith which the Church has ever held in Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of the World, in whom we are saved by grace through faith, and in accordance with the revelation of God which he made, being himself God incarnate, they worship one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit' (N; so almost verbatim L; CNI/P; G). CSI is distinctive here in three ways. First, the question-begging reference to 'the faith which the Church has ever held' is omitted.<sup>15</sup> Second, the affirmations about biblical authority and acceptance of the Creeds as witnessing to the biblical faith *precede* the Trinitarian statement, which is linked to them by the words 'Thus it (CSI) believes. . . .' Third, the statement itself makes explicit reference to creation, preservation, justification in and through Christ *alone* (CNI/P and G also have 'alone', but not L or N), and sanctification within the fellowship of Christ's Body. This fulness is very welcome, and in fact at every point the CSI statement on the Trinitarian faith is superior.

(iv) *The Holy Spirit* is mentioned, first, as interpreting Scripture to the church ('reveal' is the word used, but this is what is meant)—so CSI, CNI/P, N, G; second, as confirming the biblical faith in the church's experience—so, again, CSI, CNI/P, N, G; third, as guiding the church in transmitting the canonical Scriptures—so L. L has

nothing on the first point and speaks of the faith as being confirmed, not by the Spirit, but 'in the *spiritual experience* of the Church' (shades of Schleiermacher!), so that altogether its witness to the Holy Spirit is much less adequate than that of the other four statements.

(v) *The confessions of the uniting churches* are sanctioned for use as teaching aids, so long as they are consistent with the united church's own standards (CSI Basis—not Constitution; N; L). They will thus be tolerated, though not exactly welcomed. CNI/P goes further: it 'acknowledges the witness to the Catholic faith contained in the Confessions of Faith adopted both at the time of the Reformation and subsequently, and formulated by the uniting Churches or their parent Churches', and goes on to list five specific statements which it 'accepts' as consistent with its own doctrinal standards. The 39 Articles, which had no place in the constitution of the Church of India, Burma and Pakistan, are not in the list, but the reference to 'parent Churches' brings them within the purview of this acknowledgment. We should note that one of the five accepted statements is the Confession of Faith of the United Church of Northern India, which begins thus:

The United Church of Northern India adopting the following as its Confession of Faith, to be subscribed by ministers, licentiatees and elders, does not thereby reject any of the doctrinal standards of the parent Churches, but, on the contrary, commends them—especially the Westminster Confession of Faith, and the Confession and Canons of the Synod of Dort, the Heidelberg Catechism, Luther's Catechism and the Augsburg Confession—as worthy exponents of the Word of God, and as systems of doctrine to be taught in our Churches and seminaries.<sup>14</sup>

One wishes that the schemes under review contained as positive an affirmation of continuity with the evangelical past as this.

(vi) *The right of the united church to issue its own supplementary doctrinal statements* is affirmed, subject to such statements agreeing with Scripture (CSI, CNI/P, N, L).

(vii) *Clerical assent to the Constitution, including the doctrinal platform*, is called for by CSI, CNI/P, L and N.<sup>15</sup>

2. *Doctrinal standards in group (b)*. The general outlines of (a) are followed, but with additional detail on the contents of Scripture, as witness to God's mighty acts in general and Jesus Christ in particular (Au, COCU, Can.); on the relation between Scripture and tradition (COCU); and on the special value of Reformation and post-Reformation confessions (Au, COCU). On the latter point, Au says:

The doctrine of justification by grace through faith, brought to light anew in the Confessions of the Reformation, is an essential contribution to the catholic formulation of the Faith. The Uniting Church acknowledges the witness borne to the Catholic Faith by the great Confessions of the Reformation and in particular the First Scots Confession of Faith, the Second Helvetic Confession of Faith, the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Savoy Declaration and the later confessional statement of

John Wesley in his forty-four sermons, and gives to these documents an honoured place in its life and thought. In particular the Uniting Church cherishes the emphasis which these documents place upon the centrality of the Person of Christ in the *ordo salutis* (order of salvation). . . .<sup>19</sup>

Also, Au brackets the Chalcedonian Definition with the two ecumenical Creeds 'as authoritative statements of the Faith and as safeguards to the right understanding thereof.' With this, Au requires a personal affirmation at ordination of belief in the united church's doctrinal basis. The Presbyterian word, 'vow', is used for this.<sup>19</sup>

3. *Doctrinal standards in the New Zealand scheme* (c). *The Plan for Union* presents the following features:

(i) At the start of the first section, called *The Principles* (pp. 10ff.), comes a six-page statement (36 paragraphs, about 2,000 words) entitled 'The Faith We Affirm Together'. This was drawn up for approval by each of the negotiating churches as a contemporary account of the faith held in common, full enough to be an adequate basis for mutual trust as they sought to proceed to union. It is arranged under these heads: (1) The Standards of the Church; (2) God; (3) Man; (4) New Life in Christ; (5) The Church; (6) Sacraments of the Gospel; (7) The Ministry; (8) The World and the Church; (9) The Christian Hope (secs. 11-46).

(ii) The constitutional proposals are made in the second section, called *The Structure*. Sub-section 3, 'The Faith of the Church', opens thus:

125. In the articles of this section the Church of Christ in New Zealand declares those standards which are necessary for the continuity in the Church of the apostolic faith and order which belong to the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church of which this Church believes itself to be part.

126. Paragraphs 127, 128 and 129 may therefore not be subject to alteration or amendment in substance, and adherence to the standards therein contained is held to be essential to the Church's continuity and corporate life.

What do the entrenched clauses contain? The first is an almost verbatim reproduction of the standard statement of group (a) on Scripture (127), and the second is an expanded version of its standard statement about the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds (128). The extra material is like the curate's egg, as the following extract shows:

. . . their (the Creeds') authority derives from their faithfulness to the Scriptures. In its duties as guardian of the truths of the Gospel the Church will teach the faith of the Creeds, recognising their historically conditioned character and their corporate nature, and in so doing will use them persuasively and not coercively.

A snug corner for the unorthodox is provided by the latter statement, which seems to promise immunity from church discipline to clergy who query the creeds, and so has an even more negative and discouraging

impact that Note (i) of the CSI Basis, discussed above. Finally we read:

129. They (the uniting Churches) accept as also essential to the life of the Church the faithful preaching of the Gospel, the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion instituted by our Lord, a life ordered by the Holy Spirit in humble service and loving fellowship, and a ministry acknowledged both throughout this Church and as far as may be beyond it to possess that continuity with the ministry of the apostolic Church which may serve to preserve and strengthen the unity of the Body of Christ.

It will not escape notice that in paragraphs 127-129 the entire Lambeth Quadilateral has been entrenched, and a particular sort of ministerial pedigree has been declared (not *desirable*, but) *essential* to the life of the Church. This might be thought to be pitching it rather strong, to be unprovable by Scripture, and to be out of place in an account of the *faith* (as distinct from the *opinion*) of any Church; but these points cannot be pursued here.

(iii) In paragraphs 134-141 a detailed Form of Assent for clergy and office-bearers is given, evidently modelled on the Doctrine Commission's 1968 proposal. The Assent, given in response to a didactic Preface, runs thus:

I, A.B., profess my firm and sincere belief in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Saviour and sincerely hold to the faith proclaimed in Holy Scripture and witnessed to in the Catholic Creeds. I give my allegiance to the Church of Christ in New Zealand and to its doctrine expressed in 'The Faith We Affirm Together'.

It is noteworthy that 'The Faith We Affirm Together' (described in the Preface as the united church's specific witness to Christian truth) is explicitly assented to.

(iv) 'The Faith We Affirm Together' attests the confessional statements of the uniting Churches as follows:

22. The Westminster Confession of Faith, the Savoy Declaration, the Thirty-nine Articles, the Standard Sermons and Notes on the New Testament of John Wesley, the Declaration and Address of Thomas Campbell, are held in honour as embodying traditions now merged in the united Church. Since they arose to meet special situations in history, no finality can attach to them. Nevertheless, in so far as they are consistent with the teaching of the Bible and of the Creeds, they will enrich the united Church's understanding of its faith and mission.

23. It is the right and duty of the united Church to use this historic witness to the Christian Faith, of which this present declaration 'The Faith we Affirm Together' is a contemporary expression, for the instruction of its people and the guiding and ordering of its life.

The following comments on the New Zealand material may be made:

1. 'The Faith We Affirm Together,' like so much committee-writing, is as dull as it is diligent. Philip Thomas, a New Zealand scholar, calls it 'embarrassingly superficial . . . without much crispness . . .

“churchy”’, though he recognises it as a genuine confession of Jesus Christ as Lord. This is fair comment. However, a lukewarm account of what a united Church is going to stand for damps down enthusiasm for union straight away; as seems indeed to have happened in New Zealand.

2. The emphasis in paragraphs 22 and 128 on the non-finality of creeds and confessions, while sound in itself, is a major depressant in a document of this kind, for its presence indicates that somewhere doctrinal radicals are digging in. Otherwise, who would have wanted to entrench this point?

3. The attestation of the Protestant confessions in paragraphs 22f. is something of a backhander downgrading them, and is hard to read as a gesture of welcome to them or continuity with them. This, too, is a depressant—to say no more!

### III *A Way Forward for England?*

SUPPOSE, now, that the present exploratory talks lead to serious multilateral negotiations for church union in England, what will be the best course to follow with regard to a basis of faith? Three courses may be ruled out at once as unsatisfactory. First, to say with L and G that the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds are a sufficient statement of the Christian faith to be a basis for union, and therefore to look no further, would not do. If one could invoke an agreed exposition of ‘the holy catholic church’ and ‘the forgiveness of sins’ in relation to ‘one baptism’, the case would be different—but at these points Rome and the Orthodox churches understand the Creeds one way and Protestants another, and the Lanka-Ghana statement bids fair to beg the whole question of the Reformation. As CSI says, the Creeds are not a complete expression of the Christian faith; nor in our situation can they function as a sufficient one. They must certainly be affirmed and embraced, but they must also be supplemented. Second, it would be neither right nor hopeful to suggest that the basis of faith for a new church should be the existing doctrinal platform of one of the uniting bodies, old or new, e.g. the Articles (1571) or ‘The Faith of the United Reformed Church’ (1970): to be credible as a new church, as distinct from a concealed take-over by one of the parties involved, the united body must have a new confession which is authentically its own. Third, the long history and present complexity of doctrinal debate within and between the separated churches of England makes it necessary to explore disputed issues in some detail in order to establish doctrinal trust (as the Anglican-Methodist experience showed), and this fact rules out any thought that a doctrinal platform of one or two pages’ length (200-500 words) would fill the bill as it did in the Indian and African schemes. It would seem wiser and indeed necessary to take a leaf out

of New Zealand's book, and plead for the following:

1. A contemporary statement of the faith should be drawn up to which each participating church will be asked to assent as a basis for coming together. The statement must establish explicit continuity between the faith as confessed in each uniting church's present standards and as the united church will confess it. It will have to be worked on till it commands moral unanimity among all participating bodies (that is, till each is able to recognise that all the others are virtually solid in accepting it).

2. A form of ministerial assent should be framed which makes explicit reference to this statement, as New Zealand's proposed assent does to 'The Faith We Affirm Together', and as the Church of England's new form of assent (quoted in footnote 2 of this article) does to our present formularies.

The case for this suggestion may be made along three lines.

1. *This course is necessary*; for

(i) As we said above, doctrinal distrust runs deep in England, and it has many cross-currents. No united church, therefore, will (or should) be able to get off the ground without establishing doctrinal confidence in relation to itself and between its future members. The way in which the doctrinal parts of the 1963 Anglican-Methodist *Conversations* report had to be 'clarified' by the second Anglican-Methodist Unity Commission should have shown us all how fruitless and indeed impossible it is to cut corners in this matter. On the other hand, the new statements on disputed topics which the second Commission produced, and even more *Growing into Union*, chapters 1-6, may fairly be invoked as showing how much can be achieved when areas of inherited mutual distrust are patiently explored. Humanly speaking, it is hard to see how, without the fillip of positive theological agreement creating positive enthusiasm for that view of the faith for which the new church will stand, any future attempts at union can prosper better than the Anglican-Methodist plan did. So a full and convincing statement of a common faith, as a basis for mutual confidence, is priority number one.

(ii) It now seems certain that the inescapable problem of integrating episcopal and non-episcopal ministries in a united Church will not be solved in England by any form of mutual laying-on of hands. Recent history has shown that such a proposal, even when spelt out in the way most favourable to catholic Anglican claims, divides the Church of England in a proportion of approximately three to two; which is not good enough. Only one way seems open—that on which evangelicals and catholics agreed in *Growing into Union*, whereby non-episcopal ministers are received under episcopal jurisdiction without any quasi-ordination. But catholic Anglican acceptance of this proposal will depend on the united church setting it in the context of a 'supernaturalist' view of the church and its ministry, based on a high Christo-

logy and a strong doctrine of revelation and grace: all of which evangelicals want, or should want, to stand for too. Only, however, if the united church explicitly confesses these things can its commitment to them be treated as fact. This was one reason (there were several) why *Growing into Union* found it necessary to say: 'A contemporary declaration of faith for a united Church needs to be drawn up as a basis for uniting to form it, and the abiding status of the declaration within the new body must be agreed from the start. . . . It must be possible to know in advance that as a corporate body a united Church will stand for the historic faith in its fulness, and only a contemporary confessional statement, given constitutional status in advance, will make this possible.'<sup>21</sup> This was, in effect, a plea for the New Zealand procedure, and for a statement that would be fairly full.

(iii) Only the course proposed can avoid the sense of bad faith being shown towards members of the uniting churches with alert doctrinal consciences and objections of principle to latitudinarianism and theological indifference. 'Many in (all) Churches would say that their allegiance depends directly on what their Church stands for, and they are obviously right to insist that the united Church should publicly stand for all that (their own) Church stood for in separation. Any further confession of faith which the new Church may need must therefore embody the substance of the existing doctrinal standards of (the uniting) Churches'—otherwise problems of allegiance will be felt acutely, and continuing 'rumps' become likely.'<sup>22</sup> Those who see themselves as trustees for a substantial doctrinal inheritance cannot but make overt continuity of faith, and of ministerial commitment to that faith, as at present, a condition of transferring allegiance to a new ecclesiastical body. But to demonstrate such continuity a sizeable declaration of faith will be required.

(iv) Any united church of tomorrow will have to talk to the Church of Rome, and for this purpose both ecumenical courtesy and Christian responsibility combine, as was hinted earlier, to require that the new body offer a full account of its doctrinal position.

## 2. *This course is possible; for*

(i) The desired declaration could follow the lines of the New Zealand statement, or the 1,300-word 'Faith of the United Reformed Church' in clause 7 of the United Reformed Church Scheme of Union,<sup>23</sup> or even the first section of the Keele statement!<sup>24</sup>

(ii) The desired form of assent can be modelled on that which New Zealand proposed, and which the Church of England is currently adopting.

(iii) There is abundant resource material available. The doctrinal statements of the Anglican-Methodist Unity Commission and *Growing into Union* have been mentioned, the doctrinal proposals of other union schemes have been reviewed, and much else is available on which the framers of a new confession could draw.

3. *This course could be satisfactory.* It could provide a declaration of faith for the new church definite enough to dispel any suspicion of doctrinal indifferentism or latitudinarianism. It could provide a meaningful doctrinal commitment for the new church's ministers, as a basis of trust between them and the people they serve. It could provide the maximum encouragement to the new church to develop a virile orthodoxy as its central theological tradition, and so reduce the risk of conscientiously dissident rumps to a minimum.

### Conclusion

AT present, only God knows what the outcome of the 'talks about talks' will be, and it is no part of this article's purpose to guess. We are analysing a problem, not making a prediction. We have sought simply to make four points: first, that a united church, like any other, needs a convincing confession of faith; second, that of the approaches to the task of achieving such a confession that have been tried so far the New Zealand method is on the whole the best model for England (though there are areas in which we shall need to do better than New Zealand did); third, that unless such a course is followed the multilateral united church that many long to see is unlikely to materialise; fourth, that the time to ponder these things is now. The only prediction ventured is that if we fail to do so we shall find ourselves in trouble. It is to be hoped, however, that this is a prediction which we shall not have occasion to verify.

<sup>1</sup> All those invited accepted the invitation. At the first meeting, on September 19th, the consultants agreed to request Orthodox and Lutheran participation, and to meet again in December and February.

<sup>2</sup> On this problem, see R. T. Beckwith in *All in Each Place*, ed. J. I. Packer (Abingdon, MMP, 1965), pp. 116-124; my own comments in *The Articles of the Church of England*, ed. H. E. W. Turner (London, Mowbray, 1964), pp. 35-38; and the Report of the Archbishops' Commission on Christian Doctrine, *Subscription and Assent to the 39 Articles* (London, SPCK, 1968). In July, 1973, the General Synod, following in broad outline the Doctrine Commission's suggestion, began to change the form of clerical assent to a declaration made in response to an admonitory Preface. As currently drafted, this declaration reads: 'I, A. B., . . . declare my belief in the faith which is revealed in the Holy Scriptures, and set forth in the Catholic Creeds, and to which the historic formularies of the Church of England bear witness.'

<sup>3</sup> 'As we follow in order the three Creeds themselves, the Apostles', the Nicene, and the Athanasian, we find that there is a tendency to elaboration, to a fuller theological statement, and to an explanation of what is involved in the original summary of belief. The confessions of faith in the sixteenth century are really only an extension, prolongation, and development of the same process' (W. H. Griffith Thomas, *The Principles of Theology* (London, CBRP, 3rd edition, 1945), p. xxv.).

<sup>4</sup> Gustaf Aulén, *Reformation and Catholicity* (Eng. tr. Edinburgh, Oliver and Boyd, 1962), *passim*.

<sup>5</sup> Anglicans have viewed catholicity in these terms since the Reformation. P. E. Hughes quotes William Whitaker's definition of 'catholics' as 'those who profess sound, solid and pure doctrine', and Jewel's revealing protest: 'If we be heretics that teach this doctrine, what are the ancient fathers, the doctors,



the apostles, that have taught the same? If they were catholics . . . how is it that only we are not catholics, writing and saying as they did?' (*Theology of the English Reformers*, London, Hodder, 1965, p. 181f.) The first commentator on the Articles, Thomas Rogers, called the second (1607) edition of his book *The Catholic Doctrine Believed and Professed in the Church of England*.

- \* Burnet's *Exposition*, first published in 1699, was last reissued, with additional notes for students, by James R. Page in 1839. E. H. Browne's *Exposition* (two volumes, 1850, 1853; many subsequent editions) took its place and was 'long a standard work among theological students' (*ODCC*, s.v. Browne).
- <sup>7</sup> O. R. Johnston's study guide to the Articles, *The Faith We Hold* (London, CBRP, 1968) is the latest such treatment.
- <sup>8</sup> The most striking modern example of this is the discovery that the fourth session of the Council of Trent did not, after all, teach that Scripture and unwritten traditions were two distinct sources of revelation. See J. R. Gieselmann, 'Scripture, Tradition, and the Church: an ecumenical problem' in *Christianity Divided*, ed. D. J. Callahan, H. A. Obermann and D. J. O'Hanlon (London, Sheed and Ward, 1962), pp. 35ff.
- <sup>9</sup> 'There is . . . the responsibility of the Church to declare to each generation what is the faith, to expose and combat errors destructive of the faith, to expel from her body doctrines which pervert the faith, and to lead her members into a full and vivid apprehension of the faith. As a human society the Church must have the power to do this and the responsibility to do it. If it fails to do this it ceases to have any recognizable identity of its own. This is always a fresh task in every generation, for thought is never still. . . . No appeal, whether to ecumenical creeds, to the universal belief of the Church, or to the Scriptures, can alter the fact that the Church has to state in every new generation how it interprets the historic faith, and how it relates it to the new thought and experience of its time. This act of confession has to be the work of the living Church indwelt by the living Spirit' (Lesslie Newbigin, *The Reunion of the Church*, London, SCM, 2nd edition, 1960, p. 137f.).
- <sup>10</sup> Pp. 112-147. The words quoted are on p. 143.
- <sup>11</sup> Documents: *Constitution of the Church of South India*, Madras, 1963; *Plan of Church Union in North India and Pakistan*, 4th edition, Madras, 1965; *Scheme of Church Union in Ceylon*, 3rd edition amended, Madras, 1964; *Scheme of Church Union in Nigeria*, 3rd edition, Lagos, 1963; *Proposed Basis of Union prepared by the Ghana Church Union Committee*, Accra, 1963.
- <sup>12</sup> *The Plan for Union*, 2nd edition, Wellington, 1971, was preceded by four Reports to the negotiating Churches, in the first of which (1965) the first draft of 'The Faith We Affirm Together' appeared. In the late sixties the Bultmannite views of Professor Lloyd Geering of Knox College, Dunedin, caused a storm and a crisis of confidence, and the final form of the doctrinal sections of *The Plan of Union* reflect this.
- <sup>13</sup> *op. cit.*, p. xix.
- <sup>14</sup> Cf. Newbigin, *op. cit.*, pp. 141ff.
- <sup>15</sup> Newbigin, pp. 129f., shows effectively just how question-begging it is. 'One must begin by defining the word "Church" in terms of the faith one wishes to establish, and then define the faith as what the Church—so defined—has always believed.'
- <sup>16</sup> Cited from Stephen F. Bayne, *Ceylon North India Pakistan*, London, SPCK, 1960, p. 154. Bayne prints the entire Confession, which is an impressive document in its own right.
- <sup>17</sup> *Constitution . . .*, p. 41; *Plan . . .*, p. 30; *Scheme . . . Ceylon*, p. 44; *Scheme . . . Nigeria*, p. 36, cf. p. 59.
- <sup>18</sup> p. 78.
- <sup>19</sup> p. 84.
- <sup>20</sup> *Latimer*, March 1972, pp. 13f.
- <sup>21</sup> C. O. Buchanan, E. L. Mascall, J. I. Packer, Bishop of Willesden, *Growing into Union*, London, SPCK, 1970, pp. 108f.
- <sup>22</sup> *Anglican-Methodist Unity 2: The Scheme*, London, SPCK, 1968, sec. 277, p. 89.
- <sup>23</sup> *The Scheme of Union with the Proposed Parliamentary Bill . . .*, Birmingham, 1970, pp. 22ff.
- <sup>24</sup> Keele '67, London, Falcon, 1967, pp. 19ff.