

UNITY IN FAITH

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UNITY IN FAITH is not an obvious and unquestioned goal. Although we talk about the 'scandal of disunity', it is doubtful whether the world finds a variety of faiths a great stumbling block. Indeed a pluralist society expects to find a wide range of values and beliefs on offer from which the individual can choose according to personal conviction or taste. Have we not abandoned the cosy corner shop with its limited range of goods and discovered the joys of choice in the supermarket? Although quarrelsomeness and intolerance are deplored, differences of faith and styles of worship are expected by the consumer.

It seems that the consumer mentality has rubbed off on the Church. The recent covenanting proposals offered a better ecclesiastical neighbourliness but not that marriage of Churches to which we had been called by the old Anglican-Methodist unity scheme.¹ That had been explicit in its commitment to the goal of organic unity and had given evidence of some labour towards the articulation of common faith. The covenanting proposals, in offering a federation of Churches linked by mutual recognition of members and ministries and in taking lightly the need to produce the results of a search for unity in faith, had something of the pragmatic air of the Elizabethan Settlement so aspiring to fulfil the old dream of a 'wider establishment' of the sort proposed by Thomas Arnold.²

The failure of these proposals was necessary in order to get ecumenism back on course in its search for one Church united in one faith, but it was a painful necessity. Hard lessons have to be learned especially by the Church of England which has now to recognize that the Elizabethan attempt at comprehensiveness under the umbrella of common institutions and liturgy was only partially successful and that where it seemed successful — by laying aside contentious matters — it has stored up trouble. In short, Anglicans have to discover that to comprehend was not to unite. That, within the Church of England, remains a task to be achieved.

In recent years the advocates of a looser Church unity with a greater theological variety have drawn on the support of those scholars who have emphasized the pluralism of the New Testament. We have been taught that, instead of trying to squash together all

this variety in a summer pudding of New Testament theology, we should savour each of its separate fruits. Some years ago Ernest Käsemann was able to write: 'The New Testament Canon does not as such constitute the foundations of the unity of the Church. On the contrary, as such it provides the basis for the multiplicity of confessions'.³ Clearly to grasp this New Testament variety has been of great benefit to us. We are no longer burdened with the picture of a monolithic Church complete with all its apparatus, rolling off the apostolic production line. Yet this New Testament pluralism when erected into an ideology to justify a particular ecumenical programme is not immune from criticism. There is no evidence that this early variety met the believer in the same way as contemporary christian variety meets us, for there is no suggestion that pauline and johannine communities existed cheek by jowl in one place as do our separated Churches today. It does not appear that the first-century Christian could wake up one morning and say: 'Today I feel like going to the pauline church!' Indeed this pluralist ideology seems to take seriously neither the development of the Church beyond the New Testament period nor the canon of scripture itself. The seeds of concern for common faith and order which are there in the very pages of the New Testament were to grow and flourish as the christian enterprise widened its embrace to take on board an ever greater variety of human culture. However tortuous the development of the canon, it brought a significant enrichment to every individual christian community. Far from being an *à la carte* menu from which we are invited to pick according to taste and thus become either pauline or johannine Christians, we are challenged to take on board all traditions. Communities with a pauline origin are now faced with John as well. This causes difficulties as the witness of Paul has to be related to that of John. The human task of discovering whether different expressions involve different meanings or whether they are different ways of saying the same thing has to be taken up. The Church is thus set on the path towards common faith articulated in creeds and conciliar definitions.

The case for unity in faith cannot rest simply on the vulnerability of the pluralist ideology but on the reassertion of the conviction that what is fundamental to Christianity is that through all the variety of human religious experience we are in the end confronted by the self-communication of the one God. Of course if the New Testament were just the literary deposit of a variety of human experiences of God, then the federalist supermarket of faith might be the best model

of christian unity. But if the New Testament is all that and more, if in all this variety we are met by the self-disclosure of the eternal God, then we are driven to seek one faith in one communion. Granted the limited and inadequate nature of human language, the issue remains in fact whether we have received the word of God, not as the word of men, but as it is in truth the word of God (cf 1 Thess 2,13).

In seeking unity in faith we are responding to both the richness and the simplicity of the revelation of the one God. There can be no grudging minimalism in this as if we would only take so much of him as will fit the pint pots of our apprehension. It is our joy to receive all that God has disclosed of himself. The message of the Church can be no less than 'the unsearchable riches of Christ' (Eph 3,8). The Epistle to the Ephesians makes it clear that this is a process of growing up. The variety of ministries exist for this building up of the Body of Christ 'till we come to the unity of faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ'. 'Speaking the truth in love we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ' (Eph 4,1-16).

And yet with the riches goes the simplicity. The very words and images which are bent and hammered to bear witness to the full implications of this revelation always remain signposts pointing to the matter-of-fact reality of Jesus. Here are words which do not encase him but drive us to meet him. Whenever the Word made flesh drifts towards becoming word again we are brought back to the person of the crucified and living one. The apostle knows the simplicity of this centre: 'I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified' (1 Cor 2,2). If the quarrelsome Corinthians are to be united in the same mind and the same judgment then they must be dragged forward from the partial insights of Apollos, Cephas and Paul to the one Christ. 'Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?' (1 Cor 1,10-17). The developing understanding of the full riches of Christ is kept on course by a constant reference back to 'that which was from the beginning, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, the word of life' (1 Jn 1,1). Thus in the end, insists Rahner, what the Church has to say is a 'very little thing': 'What it tells us is that there is an impenetrable mystery of the most real kind in our lives, namely God, and that God is near to us, that the absolute self-communication of this God to us has been manifested in history in a manner which is irreversible and valid in Jesus and his fate'.⁴ If from

this simplicity we have to reach out towards the full riches then, in order to preserve ourselves from a fanciful gnosticism, we have to be always making the return from riches to simplicity.

This relationship between richness and simplicity which we know in genuine spirituality, needs to be set at the heart of our search for unity in faith. As separated Churches, we are called to receive all that God has revealed of himself and we can only do this by discovering, in the other's alien and alienating affirmations, articulations of the simplicity of Christ incarnate, crucified and risen. One of the eerie things about the discussions on the covenanting proposals was the sheer lack of joy and enthusiasm in our Churches. Even those in favour seemed at times only to acquiesce in the procedure because it appeared the only option open. When a bishop accused some Anglicans of having a romantic love affair with Rome, one ruefully concluded that the union of separated brethren ought to look more like that than a weary merger of corporations. Joy in ecumenism kindles at the point where we perceive that it is all for the sake of the gospel and that we might become more complete and balanced disciples. We are in ecumenism to be 'sanctified through the truth' (Jn 17,17), to be united by being more open to that word of God which is truth. We need one another in order to receive Christ more fully.

Grasp that and there is no danger of looking for unity in faith by cutting faith back to an ever barer minimum. Even talk about 'essentials' and 'non-essentials' can be misleading. It is not only notoriously difficult to get agreement on which is which but even more difficult to discover on what grounds some articles of faith are considered essential and others non-essential. *Sola scriptura* can leave us not only without a united ministry but also without the dogmas of Incarnation and Trinity. As we shall see, Vatican II's concept of a 'hierarchy of truths' is useful, but the context shows that it has no minimalizing intention. The claim that 'there exists an order or hierarchy of truths since they vary in their relation to the foundation of the christian faith' goes with the insistence that 'the doctrine be clearly presented in its entirety' and a warning against 'a false irenicism which harms the purity of catholic doctrine and obscures its genuine and certain meaning'.⁵

However difficult it may be here and now to receive with integrity the affirmation of another christian community as part of the full riches of Christ, what is necessary is a commitment to receive all that God has revealed of himself. That commitment cuts the nerve of

heresy for by making it I am rejecting in principle 'my insight' as representing the fulness of the gospel. Is it a dream to imagine a covenant between the churches established on such an apparently harmless but in truth revolutionary commitment? No Church would elbow another into violating its own integrity. No one would call on others to do what in conscience they could not do. We would discover ourselves encouraging one another to affirm what we believed to be true and would lay ourselves open to receive the word of God. Sometimes Anglicans are heard to say 'We will take Vatican II but not Vatican I'. That is not only crying for the moon, it is an insensitive plea to stop fellow Christians from making an affirmation which is part of their life. I may have serious hesitations about accepting what Vatican I says but, if by baptism we belong to one another, then the context is created for the sort of conversation in which brothers can explain to one another both their affirmations and hesitations. As the Pope said at Canterbury: 'Love grows by means of Truth and Truth draws near by means of Love'. It is here that the need for simplicity is discovered. The way we can receive the alien and alienating affirmations of other Christians is by seeing how this flourishing and ebullient branch is joined to the basic tree of the gospel. This of course is what section 11 of the Decree on Ecumenism is after:

In ecumenical dialogue Catholic theologians, standing fast by the teaching of the Church yet searching together with separated brethren into the divine mysteries, should do so with love for the truth, with charity and with humility. . . . Thus the way will be opened whereby this kind of 'fraternal rivalry' will incite all to a deeper realization and a clearer expression of the unfathomable riches of Christ.⁶

And that this is no dream, those who have laboured on Joint Commissions have discovered. Despite the cries of 'sell-out' from those still locked in the world of ecclesiastical debate and despite the even more wounding cynicism of those who see in common statements of faith only verbal conjuring tricks, honest Christians have dug beneath alienating language to common ground where they are at last able to recognize a common faith. Affirmations are not left behind but rediscovered as witnesses to the full riches of Christ. What is now needed is that the conditions of common prayer and friendship whereby a few theologians have been able to discover this should be reproduced for the many.

Perhaps at the heart of christian division lies a division between the affirmers of fulness and those who would simplify by cutting

back to the basic thing. What we are after is nothing less than that affirmation and simplification should belong together. It is natural for the affirmer to be quick on the draw in accusing the simplifier of heresy but, as Karl Rahner has reminded us, 'heresy' in our fragmented pluralist world is a complex matter. Because we live with a babel of languages it is often difficult to be sure whether we are confronted by a different way of expressing the same faith or with a different faith. This pluralism, Rahner insists, invades our own lives so that we find ourselves having to speak the truth about things in several languages. We have to 'recognize and unreservedly to embrace this pluralism in our intellectual life, painful and perilous though it often seems'.⁷

Of course in seeking to recognize in one another a common faith we have to exercise discernment and judgment. Rahner by no means banishes the word 'heresy' from his vocabulary, but just as we must take seriously the complexity of heresy so too we have to realize that orthodoxy is more than getting the words right. Orthodoxy involves the whole package of christian life and includes our worship and doing of the truth. Some thinkers, it would appear, suffer from a schism between their intellectual apprehension of faith and their religious adherence to it. How do you assess the orthodoxy of someone who, at the level of theological articulation, seems a unitarian while at the level of prayer is clearly trinitarian? I suggest that such a schism which exists in individuals may also apply to communities, so that a balanced judgment about attitudes to the Eucharist or marian dogmas may as much depend on the part the Eucharist plays in their church life and on their liturgical calendars as on their articulated understanding of these practices.

If patience is required from the affirmer, then equally a refusal to acquiesce in the divorce between mind and heart is required of the simplifier. Rahner does not see the fact of pluralism as an unambiguous good:

The individual has the duty and the power to advance one step and to make some attempt at overcoming the situation of pluralism and of disparate forces in the direction of achieving a synthesis of all his various branches of knowledge within a single overall harmonized system of ideas.⁸

But this, he warns, never fully succeeds.

The failure of the covenanting proposals has shown the Church of England that the attempt to contain its variety by way of comprehension is not quite enough. Up against decisions which

involve moving into a closer relationship with other Churches, our partners want to know, not where Evangelicals, Liberals, or Anglo-catholics stand, but where the Church of England itself stands. Unity in faith cannot be laid aside in the hopes that common liturgy and institutions will solve the problem for us. But if anglican comprehensiveness has not proved to be the ecumenical trump card we imagined it might be, genuine lessons are to be learned from what I shall call anglican liberality. As will become clear, this is a very different thing from liberalism. It is the fruit of pastoral rather than academic experience. The individual in search of faith must find his unique way to Christ. Jack's grasp of the truth will not be the same as mine for, although we say the same creed together, the bits which come alive for him will not necessarily be the same bits which have come alive for me. We go on saying the creed together because we are united in believing that the fulness of God's truth is more than our individual apprehensions of it. Neither Jack nor I can rest content with our lopsidedness, we must both be exposed to truth deeper and wider than what we can see. And yet neither of us must ever pretend to believe more than what we can with integrity believe. Indeed if some zealot comes at me wielding the creed as a bludgeon or confronting me with it as an examination paper, my growth is impeded. I either take on board mere words or I retreat back into the safety of what I have grasped. The pilgrim in faith needs to have his feet set in a broad room in which he has space to be led by Holy Spirit into all truth. The wise pastor knows that each soul can only move at the pace set by the divine patience. It is this insight, not a reductionist liberalism, which is the foundation of the anglican love of freedom.

'Truth grows by means of Love' and freedom is a form of love. What is true for individuals may surely be true for christian communities which seek common faith. We need to give each other space not only to affirm what we believe to be true but to allow ourselves to grow into the fulness of faith. What has to be overcome is the fear that affirmation and freedom are incompatible. Christians the world over rejoice at the ministry of Pope John Paul II because it is one of affirmation in simplicity and as such is helping us to grow in faith. But this rejoicing goes with a certain apprehension that there are those in the Roman Communion who believe that post-Vatican II freedom has gone too far and that firm affirmation requires tighter discipline. If Anglicans cannot be too euphoric about comprehensiveness, we may suggest from experience that a few theological

excesses are less damaging to the people of God than disciplinarians imagine and that, in the end, the advantages of such freedom in terms of growth into christian maturity far exceed the disadvantages. In fact the Roman Communion has served the cause of our search for common faith in recent years, not by pruning its affirmations, but by setting them in the context of a new liberality. The results are manifest in our growing understanding of the petrine ministry and the marian dogmas. We have glimpsed Christ where once we were not able to do so because affirmation has been wedded to freedom.

This article started with the claim that a consumer-minded world, well used to shopping around, did not seem much interested in one faith. Yet this very world knows that the variety in which it delights is tearing it apart. It knows too that the attempt to contain cultural and national variety by way of separate development is doomed to failure. In such a small planet we cannot insulate ourselves from one another. Is there no way of having both variety and unity? Does the variety have to divide, can it not enrich us all? These are the urgent human questions which lie beneath the surface of the consumer mentality and lift the task of ecumenism out of the narrow world of ecclesiastical mergers. By sticking to the task of seeking organic unity and common faith we are labouring for what is the world's greatest need. This is the way to a variety, not held in the separate containers of independent denominations, but which in one communion can be all ours. To achieve this is more difficult than to achieve a friendly federation of Churches, but we labour in hope knowing that in the end it will be the gift of Holy Spirit who is both the agent of variety and the agent of unity.⁹

NOTES

¹ 'Covenanting proposals' refers to a recent ecumenical initiative in England (but not in the remainder of the UK) for a mutual recognition of membership and ministries between Churches and the gradual introduction of episcopacy into non-episcopal Churches. It involved four bodies: the Anglicans, Methodists, United Reformed and Moravians. The Baptists and Roman Catholics had withdrawn at an early stage of the discussions. The scheme failed because it did not receive the required majority in the General Synod of the Church of England. The other three Churches had voted in favour.

² Arnold, Thomas: *Principles of Church Reform* (London, 1962 edition), ch 2.

³ Käsemann, Ernest: *Essays on New Testament Themes* (London, 1964), p 103.

⁴ Rahner, Karl: *Theological Investigations: vol 14* (London, 1976), p 44.

⁵ Flannery, Austin (ed.): *Vatican Council II: the conciliar and post-conciliar documents* (Dublin, 1975), Decree on Ecumenism, section 11, p 462.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p 462.

⁷ Rahner, Karl: *op cit.*, p 36.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p 35.

⁹ Some will realize that this article owes much to Bishop Butler's *The Church and Unity* (London, 1979), especially pp 155ff, and to themes which recur in Michael Richards's *The Church 2001* (London, 1982), cf p 248. I would hope that they might see this as a positive Anglican response.