

# Editorial

The papers which appear in this issue of *Churchman* were given at the Church Society Spring Conference at Swanwick. The overall theme of the conference was 'The True Unity of the Church'. This implies that there is a false unity from which the true unity of the church must be distinguished; and that indeed was the object of the first part of the conference: to show that there has grown up over the past seventy years an understanding of unity which is at variance with the claims of the Gospel, and which sets store by a concept of communion which rests upon outward forms rather than upon faith. This thesis is traced in the paper on ecumenism and can be illustrated from the A.R.C.I.C. Final Report. That report has much to say about the New Testament word *koinōnia*, meaning fellowship or communion. However, in the New Testament the distinguishing mark of *koinōnia* is that it is the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, the communion of those who are regenerated by the power of the Holy Spirit, who have thus come to faith in Christ and whose minds have been illuminated to receive the truth as it is in Jesus. Amongst such there is already a unity that has been supernaturally created and which finds expression in their belonging to Christ and thereby to each other. The Final Report, however, develops an understanding of communion which centres on the bishop of the diocese 'who is responsible for preserving and promoting the integrity of the *koinōnia*' (p.54). A local church is defined as a diocese in which the focus of *koinōnia* is the diocesan bishop and it is the bishop who is the channel of *koinōnia* with the universal church; which is all rather strange when no such key rôle is attributed in Scripture to the bishop or, what is the same thing, to the elder at all. Two such different concepts of *koinōnia* and thereby of the church are indicative of the tension that exists between the claims of the modern ecumenical movement and the claims of Biblical truth. Evangelicals within the mainstream churches are being pulled in two directions at once and are confronted with a dilemma that now calls for resolution either by capitulating to the claims of ecumenism or by seeking some positive expression of that unity which we know and experience with others who share the same fundamental principles of Biblical and evangelical truth.

A tension has also built up within the historic denominations through the presence and development of liberalism. Professor Macleod draws attention in his paper ('Unity in Truth') to the Kantian dichotomy, the divide between practical and pure reason, which has affected theological thinking so deeply. The consequence of such thinking is that it is assumed that little can be said that is

reliable or certain about the noumenal and that on the whole we must be content with 'reverent agnosticism' and mystery when it comes to the knowledge of God. Modern liberalism has gone down this path and the results can be seen in many areas. The recent report of the doctrine commission 'We Believe in God' repeatedly stresses that revelation is 'incomplete, provisional, approximate and corrigible' (p.25) thus declaring its suspicion of, and lack of confidence in, propositional revelation and its validity. Our understanding of God, the report argues, is always changing and developing and may never be looked upon as complete or final; '. . . theology seeks to explore the unknown and the unobservable (sic) not by representations but by formulations of the divine behaviour which can then be constantly checked against experience' (p.28). The report appears not to make the distinction which the Bible itself makes between the secret things which God has not revealed and those which he has, but seems to lump all knowledge of God under the same category of incomplete, provisional and corrigible.

The corollary of this is, as the report itself acknowledges, pluralism in theology and in the church, and this it is claimed is an asset not a drawback. We must adopt an attitude of reverent agnosticism and 'we must not speak or act as if our way of speaking, our way of imagining [God] is valid to the exclusion of any other' (p.31). If this is so, where then, asks the report, is the unity [of the church]? and answers, Precisely in the diversity. All the different 'readings' 'insights' 'understandings' and 'languages' about God have their validity and are to be regarded as complementary and incomplete without each other. The report deliberately eschews the way of unity through doctrinal definition (p.32). 'The Bible is not the kind of book which can easily be made to yield a single consistent doctrine' (p.3). The Bishops' Report, 'The Nature of Christian Belief' also espouses doctrinal pluralism. The position it finds ultimately unacceptable is not that of Bishop Jenkins, but that of 'zealous but ill-advised ministers [who] suggest that one belief only on a particular topic, or one way only of expressing that belief, is authentic' (para.74).

An editorial in *The Times* entitled 'The Way of the Cross' written on the occasion of the installation of the present Archbishop of York, caught the present mood in theology when it concluded, '. . . the only doctrine is that there is a God expressed in many forms, through many languages and symbolised in many rituals. All are true'.

All this must be taken very seriously by evangelicals who are committed to propositional revelation and to the belief that the Gospel can be stated and distinguished from other teachings which may be similar in some respects but are themselves false Gospels. The Church of England has set itself upon a road to unity which is fundamentally incompatible and irreconcilable with the concept of unity which we believe is Biblical and which has been cherished by

evangelicals since the Reformation. The realities of this situation now impinge upon us and the strains upon existing denominational loyalties will become ever greater as the implications of ecumenism and liberalism are pressed home in the synods and councils of the church. We shall have to decide where we stand and where we propose to seek our unity—either in terms of outward order and pluralistic inclusiveness or in terms of fundamental doctrinal agreement and common proclamation with those who share with us a common faith.

The Bishop of London has said that there is now a division that runs through all the churches between those who take revelation seriously and those who imagine that it is something variable and changeable in each generation. He has also said that, as a result of this division, in the near future there will be a realignment of churches similar to that which took place at the Reformation. We agree with him in principle and we will be numbered amongst those who take revelation seriously, but we must be frank and say also that Catholicism (Anglo- and Roman) adds another factor which itself changes and transmutes revelation, i.e., tradition. In any realignment we must seek our unity with those who regard Scripture as not only supreme but also sufficient and who see the essence of the Gospel as set forth once for all in that cardinal doctrine of Scripture—*justification by faith alone*. That is why this conference was called and these papers written.

If the present trends, which are written so large in A.R.C.I.C. and the doctrinal reports of the Church continue, then they will inevitably create, indeed are already creating, a new situation in which the old denominational loyalties will be dissolved and new alignments will be necessary, and in that new situation we believe that God will do a new thing to match the needs of the time, as he did at the Reformation. It is conceivable that in that new situation the unity which has eluded evangelicals in the past may be capable of realization. We must be prepared to think in such terms for the sake of the truth, for the sake of the Gospel, which God will preserve in his own way, but which undoubtedly would be lost in a church which endorses the principles of ecumenical and pluralistic unity that are so evident and that form such a controlling force in the deliberations of the Church of England and of other mainline churches today.

**DAVID SAMUEL**