

Christian disunity - the Archbishop's new approach

6. Is the price too high?

The bind, or paradox. It seems that in this matter of unity we have at the present time to live with a paradox. The goal of all Christian people working together in unity is a noble one; but the chosen method of merging institutions to achieve 'unity' would, if successful, be a disaster for the Christian religion.

How unified is unity? Neither 'unity in diversity', nor 'pluriformity within unity', can with any pretence of conviction be said to amount to the sort of impenetrable inter-mingling mentioned in the prayer on which the church relies in its propaganda - "so that they may be one as we are one". It is, therefore, necessary, at least for promotional purposes, to continue to maintain that 'unity in diversity' etc. are only half-way houses to visible organic unity.

The prayer of Jesus. Many liberal persons when preparing sermons on the gospel of 'John' in the study know perfectly well that it is in the highest degree unlikely that Jesus delivered the Farewell Discourses, or prayed the prayer which 'John' tells us that he prayed at the end of them. When, therefore, they shepherd us forward on their chosen course assuring us that Christ prayed for visible organic unity of Christian institutions, it seems to me that the kindest thing to suppose is that they are the unsuspecting victims of their own double vision.

The Archbishop's new approach is, I believe, to be commended, if at all, as a sound pragmatic solution to a present problem.

The price is too high. The way is then open to say, "I am wholeheartedly in favour of Christian unity, BUT, if in preparing me for merger of institutions you require me to give up 'X' or 'Y', the price is too high." That would have the advantage of being a principled stance.

How can we judge whether the price is too high? All religions, all churches and all denominations have to operate in the world, and can no more escape from being contaminated by it than human beings can avoid death. Sometimes the earthly

contamination becomes so apparent and so inhibiting to what the church is trying to do that it can no longer be ignored. The contamination is seldom apparent to the particular denomination perceived by other denominations to be contaminated. Those other denominations conclude that there is contamination on the basis of their own separate histories, their reading of the Bible and the insights of their 'forefathers'. An instance of 'contamination' (in my understanding of things) is provided by the validation of the Assyrian church's treasured insight which I have mentioned in Part 4. You can assure me as often as you like that the mechanics of the working of the Spirit in the world consist of processes of validation by one church of the insights of another. I have to say "I simply do not believe you". I read what we know about God through the life and work and death of Jesus and I do not believe that the Spirit works like that. I can see, or think I can see, the human contamination that has led to the claim to validate. You can tell me over and over again that God prefers to work through bishop, priest and deacon, and I do not believe you. I see, or think I see, the Spirit working in several different ways today and I check with the scriptures and do not find any authority there for this 'contaminated' position.

The pragmatic question for us as a community looking backwards, is, "Do we inherit any non-negotiable principles from our Protestant past? And, if so, what are they? But I would not wish to spend time rehearsing the last Protestant Reformation. I would want to look forwards, and ask; "Are we the custodians on behalf of the great church today of some special insight as to how God might treat human beings such as we are?" We are not here dealing with the familiar trivia, such as, "Do I feel comfortable with this form of service on a Sunday morning?" Or "Was John Calvin more right than Thomas Aquinas on this delicate point?" As I have tried to explain in **Defending the church's truth claims** on this website, I believe that what is at stake today is nothing less than how we as human beings can properly understand that God deals with creatures such as we are. I was a Congregationalist before I became merged in the URC. I have been taught by precept and example by countless ministers and friends, and my personal conclusion is (and it is only one person's conclusion) that 'my denomination' has several important insights, which will be lost if we submerge ourselves in some wider institution. I would want to preserve the URC as a separate entity, so that it can affirm these insights to the world alongside the Roman Catholic church affirming its insights.

Others will have been brought to different positions. I can only set out what I would wish to preserve in the hope that it may stimulate others to articulate what it is that they would wish to preserve - what it is that, when they think about the next merger, makes them sad, because they fear that it is bound to be lost.

Church meeting. I believe that church meeting properly understood is an insight which ought to be preserved. As a 'technique' it is based on an understanding that God has no preferred route of communication with his people through bishop, priest and deacon. It is a way of preparing ourselves to hear and bear the working of the Spirit in our community. I believe that it is a priceless insight, though we do not always manage to let the Spirit work.

The Bible. We do not all agree about this, but I believe that it is also a priceless insight that the Spirit is still at work today expounding the Bible to us, if we could only learn how to listen. The Bible has a status quite different from that of 'Tradition'. It has the authority of the 'that without which', the sine qua non; (the same sort of ineluctable compelling power as the nature of the soil had for the first hunter gatherers who struggled to cultivate the land). Without the Bible we would have no knowledge of Jesus. It is the ultimate 'control' on piety. There is in the Roman Catholic church no tradition of paying attention to the work of New Testament scholars where their conclusions conflict with existing tradition, or throw doubt on its truth claims. We are at present at least free under the guidance of the Spirit to accept new conclusions; which is not to say that we have the courage to do so.

Freedom. I think that the freedom to restate our faith in new ways, which is asserted in our constitution, is another important affirmation of the nature of the way in which God communicates with human beings - and a vital one, if we are ever to engage with the urbane humanists and confident atheists whom we meet in England today. My pieces on this website under the title '*Defending the church's truth claims*' are largely concerned with freedom, though it is there called 'space'.

'Orders'. The notion that our ministers should be re-ordained as part of the price of a future merger is ridiculous. To accept that would be to deny a profound insight as to how God deals with his people; to fudge the issue would (in my book) be despicable.

You can see how these supposed insights mirror the insights of the Roman Catholic church expounded by Cardinal Kasper and turn them on their head. I have tried to show that no merger/covenant, or whatever, will be of the slightest use in getting us into the Christian fold unless, sooner or later, singly or cumulatively, they extinguish all the insights which many of us now treasure.

I suspect that those who engage in the stately dance of inter-church talks on our behalf would be appalled to hear it suggested that there could be so many non-negotiable insights; it would make their job impossible. So be it; let us have an open debate about where the United Reformed Church is going.

Now is the hour. It may soon be too late.