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Editorial

Talks about Talks

IN EVERY GENERATION the way in which the church works takes at least some of its characteristics from the world around it. So, just as in Rhodesia from time to time there are 'talks about talks' between the British government and the Smith régime, now we are to have a similar arrangement to see if any basis exists for a fresh round of negotiations towards Christian reunion in England. This initiative by the United Reformed Church should be welcomed as should the list of representatives nominated by the different churches. There are many signs that the ecumenical tide is rising and rising fast, but in a rather different way than was hoped in the Anglican-Methodist conversations. Most Christians, whether they were for or against the official proposals, were saddened by the failure of the two churches to agree. They continue to be saddened by the plight of the Methodist Church, whose distinctive *raison d'être* as a separate organisation has largely disappeared, but which seemed to be left in the lurch by the Church of England to which the matter was of much less vital concern. Yet the prospect now is of a much more glittering prize which might give some substance to the dreams of the Nottingham conference of 1964 that there should be a major reunion of churches in this country by 1980.

The general atmosphere of goodwill towards a one-stage multi-lateral scheme needs perhaps to be tempered by one or two considerations. The first and perhaps most important is that the genuine desire for unity that pervades the central decision-making bodies of the churches has only partially penetrated to the man and woman in the pew. One of the reasons for the failure of the Anglican-Methodist scheme was its imposition from Westminster. All concerned ministers and laypeople should be doing now whatever they can to get local congregations to know each other and to work and worship together

wherever possible. Neither dry rot in the pulpit nor death watch beetles in the pews must be allowed to frustrate the movement of God's Spirit.

The second point to be borne in mind is the danger that the sense of shame from previous failure and the positive impatience for union may lead to a scheme with inadequate foundations. Solid theological foundations with a flexible superstructure must be the order of the day. Solutions for problems should be not of the 'liberal' type (attempted compromise between different positions) but of the 'radical' type (efforts to go right behind differences to find truly common ground). We hope to carry in the Winter issue a major article on the importance of a theological basis for a united church.

Thirdly there is the problem of the inclusion of the Church of Rome. We rejoice in the change of climate that has made this possible but the likelihood is that any form of reunion involving Roman Catholics would take a good deal longer to work out than any involving only the other churches. While the talks must at every stage build bridges across this four hundred year old divide, a possible reunion bird in the hand in the next few years should not be lost in favour of two in a rather more distant bush. It may of course be that the 'talks about talks' will sift out those not yet ready for 'talks' and the primary task may then be easier.

Moral Problems

IT used to be fashionable, and relatively easy, for clergy to hold forth dogmatically about many of the individual and public moral problems of the world. It is still true that there are simple rights and wrongs and Christians should not be ashamed of making it quite clear to a confused generation where they stand on such issues. Dishonesty, lust and exploitation and oppression of others remain wrong however much they are dressed up in modern jargon. It is also true however that there are coming to the fore a considerable number of problems where there is no simple black or white answer and many factors are involved. In such cases it is pure arrogance for the theologian to pontificate without close consultation with those more immediately involved in the practical outworking of the issues. The late Dr. Ian Ramsey spoke much about the need for multi-disciplinary groups to be formed to deal with some of the problems and Bishop Huddleston has recently written in *The Times* of the need for an ethical 'think tank'.

It is increasingly evident that many scientists (using the term in its broadest sense) see the need for ethical guidelines. It is good that in the discussions about the future of this planet the Christian voice has been heard increasingly in the last year or two. Sir Kingsley Dunham, who is himself a Christian, in his presidential address to the British

Association at their meeting at Canterbury this year, called for a massive programme of research in the environmental sciences. The aim of this would be to discover the nature and magnitude of the threat to human life and to try and tackle the moral and practical issues arising. In this context it is also good to note the setting up of 'The Council for Science and Society' to act as a watchdog, and to see the name of the present Bishop of Durham, Dr. John Habgood, as one of its members. Anyone seriously concerned with the biblical doctrines of creation and man should welcome these moves.

One of the greatest and most pressing problems in this field is that of the population explosion and the ethical issues involved in attempts to control it. Few have been more closely concerned with the latter than Dr. Rex Gardner. In his Rendle Short Lecture *Moral Dilemmas in Contraceptive Developments* (CMF Publications, 21 pp., £0.15), he discusses the latest situation and draws certain conclusions as pastor as well as consultant. He states that any attempt to build Christian ethical principles on reproductive physiology should be abandoned and that where only a post-conceptual method of birth control is available it should be used with thankfulness. Any course of action adopted must stand up in four circumstances: in the consulting room, in the third world, in the sight of God and in the sight of mankind, as demonstrating God's love.

History of the Church

IN an age when it is increasingly difficult for bishops to write books it is a pleasure to welcome a new edition of the Bishop of Ripon's standard work (J. R. H. Moorman: *A History of the Church in England*, A. & C. Black, 485 pp., £3.75). He has revised all the original chapters and added a final one on 'The Modern Church (1945-1972)'. This is largely descriptive rather than evaluative or predictive but it may be that the bishop has done less than justice to the winds of change which are currently blowing across the ecclesiastical scene. R.E.N.