

Lambeth and Reunion

DAVID BROUGHTON KNOX

The third Lambeth Conference met in 1888. One of its topics was Home Reunion, that is, the reunion of the Christian denominations of the English speaking world. It put out four points on which it believed such reunion could take place. These became known as the Lambeth Quadrilateral. **Resolution 11** reads. 'The following articles supply a basis on which an approach may be made by God's blessing towards Home Reunion.

- A. The Holy Scriptures . . .
- B. The Apostles Creed . . . and the Nicene Creed . . .
- C. The two sacraments . . .
- D. The Historic Episcopate, locally adapted in the methods of its administration . . .

These four points were copied from the report of the House of Bishops of the Protestant Episcopal Church of America 1886.

It was not the first time that Lambeth had discussed the subject. At the first Lambeth Conference of 1867 Reunion was on the agenda when it assembled. But it is interesting to note that the bishops changed the subject on the agenda from Reunion to Christian Unity, that is, to fellowship between Christians, as the real subject that should be considered. In moving his amendment Dr. C.R. Sumner, Bishop of Winchester, said 'The clause has no reference to Reunion. I am not speaking of any Christian body, but of individuals' (*The Manchester Guardian* 19.6.1878).

This first Lambeth Conference put out its own four points by which it said 'unity will be most effectively promoted'. They were:

- by maintaining the faith in its purity and integrity as taught in the Holy Scriptures . . . ,
- by drawing each of us closer to our common Lord,
- by giving ourselves to much prayer and intercession,
- by the cultivation of a spirit of charity and a love of our Lord's appearing.

These four points are thoroughly scriptural, spiritual and heavenly minded. Notice the last phrase 'by the cultivation of a spirit of love of our Lord's appearing'. Such a spirit provides proper priorities for ecclesiastical endeavours. It is heavenly minded and not this-world-centred. At this first conference Christian unity is seen to be the result of the deepening of the spiritual life of individual Christians.

This is the true way forward. It was for this spiritual unity that Jesus prayed in the Upper Room on the eve of his crucifixion, 'that they may all be one, even as you Father are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us.' This is plainly a union through the Spirit with God and with one another. This prayer was fulfilled at Pentecost and the unity that the Spirit's presence in each brings about is to be preserved by Christlike behaviour towards one another and the removal of man-made barriers which keep us separate. This prayer of our Lord for unity of Christians with one another and with the Godhead has nothing to do with denominational amalgamation, as it is so constantly misapplied these days. The first Lambeth Conference correctly applied this verse to the Christian unity between individuals for the promotion of which they enumerated their four points.

However, the first Lambeth conference's stress on the importance of promoting Christian fellowship in spiritual unity was not followed up. In 1888, at the third conference, the subject was the reunion (that is to say the amalgamation) of the English speaking denominations as the way to achieve Christian unity. It, too, enumerated four points on which such unity might be based, namely Holy Scripture, the creeds, the two sacraments and the historic episcopate. These four points became known as the Lambeth Quadrilateral.

The first three—the scriptures, the creeds, the two sacraments—really amount to one. For the creeds are expressions of scripture, which have commended themselves over the centuries as true expressions of scripture, and the two sacraments are sacraments of the gospel, that is, they exhibit and hold out the scriptural gospel for the believer to embrace. They are visible words of scripture. So the first three points of the Lambeth conference are, in essence, one—Holy Scripture. But the fourth point, the historic episcopate, is not to be found in scripture. To require it as a necessity to fulfil God's command to be in fellowship with each other, is to contravene Article 6 of the 39 Articles. Nor must we ever forget that though bishops are mentioned in the New Testament and continued on in the early church, they then fulfilled quite different functions to those known as bishops in mediaeval and modern times. This latter office is not known in the New Testament or the primitive church. The name is the same but the office is different. Moreover, though ministry is essential in the congregation, and the Lord will ensure that it is present in every spiritual congregation, scripture does not enjoin any particular sort except that it is to be a teaching ministry, teaching from generation to generation the apostolic tradition of the gospel (2 Tim 2:2). To endeavour to maintain the unity of the spirit is an essential Christian duty but the scripture never hints that the maintenance of a certain type of ministry is necessary to fulfil this duty. For example, in Ephesians 4:2, Paul notes seven bases of unity of the church. The Christian ministry was not one of these seven.

The first grave error of Lambeth 1888 was to introduce a non-scripture requirement for Christian fellowship—as though the scriptures were insufficient for the complete equipping of the Christian for every good work (2 Tim 3:16). The Lambeth Quadrilateral was the result of Anglo-Catholic theology. The American bishops, whose quadrilateral Lambeth took over, had made it clear that they regarded episcopacy as having the authority of our Lord and the apostles. They had said that they were prepared to make concessions for reunion on ‘all things of human ordering or of human choice’. For them episcopacy was of divine, not of human, authority. It was one of the ‘inherent parts of the sacred deposit of Christian faith and order committed by Christ and his apostles to the church and as therefore essential to the restoration of unity’ (quoted in Report of Lambeth 1888). This was simply echoing John Henry Newman’s theology in Tract 1 of the *Tracts for the Times*, or as Darwell Stone, Warden of Pusey House, Oxford put it later that ‘without a bishop there can be no priest and without a priest there can be no eucharist’. The Lambeth Quadrilateral reflected the same theology. In their encyclical letter the bishops of Lambeth 1888 said ‘We cannot desert our position as to faith or discipline’.

After the first world war at the sixth Lambeth conference in 1920 reunion was again a prominent topic. What was now envisaged was not merely home reunion but the reunion of all the denominations of every language and nation throughout the world. But the bishops had not changed their theology, though on the surface it seemed that they had. In their report they repeated, somewhat simplified, the first three points of the Lambeth Quadrilateral, namely scripture, the creeds and the two sacraments, but they expressed the fourth point as ‘a ministry acknowledged by every part of the church as possessing not only the inward call of the Spirit but also the commission of Christ and the authority of the whole body.’ Episcopacy was not expressly mentioned. Since 1888 it had come to be recognised that the Tractarian identification of episcopacy with apostolic authorisation could not be sustained. For example, a month before Lambeth 1920 Dr. A.C. Headlam of Sandey and Headlam fame and soon to become bishop of Gloucester, had published his Bampton lectures ‘The Doctrine of the Church and Christian Reunion.’ In it he said:

Episcopacy . . . was the creation of the church . . . It represents a continuous development from Apostolic times; but we cannot claim that it has apostolic authority behind it . . . we cannot claim such authority for any Christian institution or teaching unless there is the clear and certain evidence of documents coming from the time of the apostles, and we cannot believe that our Lord could have intended that any institution should be looked upon as essential to the existence of the church without giving explicit and certain directions . . . He did not directly institute or command episcopacy. We cannot claim that it

is essential to the church. Equally it is clear that there is no apostolic ordinance to be quoted in its support. There is no adequate or sufficient evidence that it was instituted by apostles (pp.105-6).

However Lambeth 1920's modification of the 1888 Quadrilateral did not in practice amount to any real change. For in their next paragraph the bishops said:

May we not reasonably claim that the episcopate is the one means of providing such a ministry. It is not that we call in question for the moment the spiritual reality of the ministries of those communions which do not possess the episcopate. On the contrary we thankfully acknowledge that these ministries have been manifestly blessed and owned by the Holy Spirit as effective means of grace. But we submit that considerations alike of history and present experience justify the claim that we make on behalf of the episcopate. Moreover, we would urge that it is now and will prove to be in the future the best instrument for maintaining the unity and the continuity of the church . . .

The bishops omitted the adjective 'historic' as a description of the episcopate they were advocating, so in theory it was open to re-definition, but in practice it has always been assumed to be the episcopate as held in the Church of England. However, the bishops had put themselves in an untenable position. They had abandoned the exclusive claim for episcopacy based on its divine authorisation and had fully acknowledged that the Holy Spirit (whose views alone should be taken into account) had blessed and owned non-episcopal ministries; but they had not budged from requiring episcopacy in any union the Church of England entered. But they based it now on *pragmatism*, as being the only likely ministry to be accepted by all. But the Spirit of God is not a spirit of pragmatism but the Spirit of Truth.

But in actual fact the bishops and the Church of England as a whole had not changed. Theoretically the bishops held that episcopacy was *de humano*, in practice they were acting as though the *de divino* of episcopacy was unassailable. For if episcopacy was of human origin, albeit arising under providential guidance, the question as to whether it should be changed for another form of ministry in order to further the divine will for unity at least ought to have been considered. But this concept has never been on the agenda in any discussion for reunion in which the Anglican church has taken part. Evangelicals are as guilty in this matter as anyone else. Anglo-Catholics used to maintain that episcopacy was of the *esse* of the church, and though perhaps they now do not do so in theory with so certain a voice, they still do so in practice. Evangelical Anglicans like to think that episcopacy is of the *bene esse* of the church. But the fact is it is neither of the *esse* or the *bene esse*, but is a matter of indifference, for all things necessary for our spiritual *well* being have been given to us in scripture.

Anglican Evangelicals should insist that in all ecumenical discussions for the amalgamation of denominations, the form of the ministry should be a subject of discussion. In 1920 the bishops took up an entirely pragmatic position in advocating episcopacy in reunion negotiations. An *a priori* intransigence in insisting on episcopacy in any reunion scheme is a contradiction of this stance, yet in practice this is what has always prevailed. Evangelicals should constantly emphasize that episcopacy as the only form of ministry cannot be established from scripture and that therefore its continuance must be subject to discussion and evaluation. What may be pragmatically useful at one time in the church's history may not be so at another. The Church of England does not say in any of its formulae that episcopacy is a good thing; merely that it has received it from ancient times and is continuing it, and that this action is not contrary to scripture.

I need not enumerate here the strengths of the episcopal structure as we know it. Its great defect as it has developed since Constantine's time is that it usurps the jurisdiction which God has entrusted to others for the well being of his church. The full development of this usurped jurisdiction is seen in the papacy. Papal infallibility is the most notorious claim of the papacy, but it is not the most serious. Papal infallibility became *de fide* for Roman Catholics only in 1870, but papal jurisdiction over the consciences of the faithful is a much more serious and much more ancient error. It was expressed forcibly by Pope Boniface VIII in the Bull *Unam Sanctam* issued in 1302. In it the pope said that it is necessary for salvation to believe that every human being is subject to the Roman Pope in every sphere, political as well as religious.

The church of Rome has never modified this claim. It is one of the reasons why the sovereign should never be a Roman Catholic, for that denomination binds all its members in conscience to be obedient to the pope, that is, were our sovereign to be a Roman Catholic he would acknowledge that the pope was sovereign over him in his political as well as his religious activities. This would be intolerable in itself and is contrary to Article Thirty seven of the Thirty nine Articles. The claim is not moribund. The church of Rome still asserts this claim. Only recently the pope beatified persons whom the government of Elizabeth I had executed as traitors; as undoubtedly they were, because they were obeying the papal bull to plot and overthrow the Queen whom the pope had deposed. The recent beatification of those who obeyed the pope in plotting against the government of their country shows that the papacy has not retracted an inch from the claims of *Unam Sanctam* and the bull of 1570 deposing Elizabeth I.

Usurped jurisdiction over the consciences of others is not made right by being shared with a college of bishops or even by it being exercised by a constitutional bishop. Episcopal jurisdiction over the

conscience has been a constant cause of disunity amongst Christ's people. This is exemplified pre-eminently in the papacy. The great schism of 1054, the division of the west at the time of the Reformation, the Uniate churches in the east today, all resulted from papal claims to jurisdiction. The papacy is not a unifying principle. Rather, it undermines unity among Christians. The same is true of episcopacy though, of course, to a lesser extent. Lambeth was mistaken in thinking that the Episcopate would further unity among Christian people. History shows that it has never done so; scripture shows that the unity amongst Christians is preserved by quite different means.

The modern bishop, in contrast to the bishops of the New Testament or the early church, in practice exercises his ministry from outside the congregation. Consequently, his ministry should be limited to that which all Christians share one to another; of teaching, encouraging, exhorting one another. The same is true of any other individual or group outside the congregation, whether superintendent, presbytery, moderator or conference. For it is to ministers within the congregation that the word of God grants jurisdiction over the consciences of members of the congregation. They are in constant human and spiritual fellowship with the congregation, of which they themselves are members, and are themselves the recipients of the exhortation, encouragement and personal instruction of their fellow members. It is because of their God-given ministry of the word of God to the congregation that these leaders have the responsibility of watching in behalf of the souls of the congregation and of admonishing them. It is because they minister God's word that they have jurisdiction and are to be submitted to by the members of the congregation.

Their rule is not that of lording it over the flock, for even an apostle does not have the right to lord it over the faith of a fellow Christian, even the faith of the congregation he founded by his preaching of the gospel (2 Cor 1:24), but he does have the right when present (as has every other Christian who is present too) of sitting with the congregation to consider how jurisdiction should be exercised when sin surfaces in the life of the congregation (1 Cor 5:3-5).

Another grave error, both of Lambeth 1888 and 1920, and of the ongoing ecumenical movements, concerns the nature of the visible church. It is an error which nowadays many Evangelical Anglicans have also adopted. A direct consequence of this error is that two further errors follow, namely the nature of the visible unity of the church and the method by which this unity may be secured. Reflect on the situation of the Christian church in the second century. The Mediterranean world was studded with Christian congregations. Each congregation had deacons and elders, one of whom was probably known as the bishop. Each of these churches or congregations was independent of all other congregations though independent is not the

right word, for being independent of one another is an attitude alien to Christianity, as it is alien to the nature of the Trinity.

The situation was a continuance of that reflected in the New Testament, for example, in the Epistle to the Hebrews chapter 13, where the ministers who had founded the church had died, but other ministers called 'leaders' were in charge of the congregation with the responsibility as God's ministers of watching over the souls of the congregation. This situation was envisaged by Paul at the end of his life when he enjoins Timothy 'The things you have heard from me among many witnesses, the same commit to faithful people who shall be able to teach others also' (2 Tim 2:2). Note the four generations of teachers of the apostolic tradition of scriptural revelation mentioned in this verse. This is the only apostolic succession known to scripture, namely succession in teaching the word of God.

The congregations of the second century were in full fellowship with each other, expressed as circumstances permitted, but none had jurisdiction over another—nor did any church officer or organization outside the congregation have any jurisdiction within the congregation. Christ's church was visible in the visibility of the churches, and in the visibility of the Christian character of the members. 'See how these Christians love one another'. The situation of the Christian communities in the early centuries is reflected, for example, in the Epistles of Clement, Polycarp and Ignatius. There were many churches, all in fellowship with each other, but there is no visible structure linking them. Roman Catholicism, ecumenicism, Anglo-Catholicism and many Evangelicals make the mistake of identifying the denominational structure which has arisen since primitive times as the visible church. For non Roman Catholics this visible church is fractured into several parts and the aim of the ecumenical movement is to reunite the parts. Traditional protestantism has seen the visible church as all Christians scattered over the face of the earth. However, Article 19 states the matter correctly—each congregation is *the* visible church.

The visible church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men in which the pure word of God is preached and the sacraments duly ministered . . .

'The visible church is a congregation'. Article 19 defines the visible church as the local church, for it is only in a local church that God's word is preached and the sacraments are administered. Lambeth 1920, however, defined visible unity as 'an outward, visible and united society, holding one faith, having its own recognized officers . . .' in fact an organizational unity. This definition would not have applied to the church of the second century where there were no bishops outside their own congregation, no archbishops, no uniformity of ministry and no visible structure linking congregation

with congregation. Yet was not the church visible then and was it not one?

A visible organization as Lambeth and the ecumenical movement envisaged can never be the visible church for it can never gather, that is, never become a church, nor can the word of God be preached within it, though, of course, it can and should be preached within the churches linked with it. The denominational organization exists for the purpose of helping congregations. It is a parachurch organization, no more a church than the church building is a church, though both are called 'church'. Both are designed to help the church fulfil its function of being the church, that is, of expressing fellowship in Christ. But in history such organizations have come to usurp jurisdiction over congregations, and in doing so, to weaken the word and the Spirit within the congregation. Jurisdiction is ministered within the visible church by the word of God, ministered to the consciences of the congregation by the Spirit of God through the leaders and the whole congregation teaching and applying the word of God one to another. So we have three errors which underly the Lambeth contribution to the ecumenical movement.

1. A mistake about the nature of the visibility of the church.
2. A mistake about the nature of the unity of the church and in what it consists.
3. A mistake in thinking episcopacy is the unifying principle of the church.

However, a fourth and greater error of Lambeth 1888 and 1920 and of the whole modern ecumenical movement and from which all the other errors flow is to mistake the nature of the church and, as a consequence, to mistake the nature of the visibility of the church, and the nature of the oneness of the church. When the essential nature of the church is apprehended from Holy Scripture the whole ecumenical movement will be seen to be wrongheaded and mostly irrelevant. In the biblical languages the word translated into English as 'church' always means a gathering. What does not gather could never be called a church in Hellenistic Greek, or in Hebrew.

When Jesus said 'On this rock I will build my church', he was using a metaphor to describe, in physical terms, the real spiritual expression of believers in their union with him. He drew this metaphor from the experience of the children of Israel whom God had redeemed from Egypt and brought to himself on eagles' wings and there in front of Sinai had formed the church in the wilderness. But through disobedience the gates of hell and death prevailed against the church. The carcasses of its members fell in the wilderness. But against Christ's assembly of his people round himself, the second death would not prevail, for their faith will not fail, for he prays for them. Indeed, his people are already seated with him in

heaven where he is, and where he is building his church, that is, gathering his gathering around himself, the Rock, the eternal God.

Jesus is in heaven, for the heavens must receive him till the restoration of all things and it is there that he is building his church. We are in Christ's presence and in each other's presence in Christ in heaven through sharing the heavenly spirit of Christ. This is a spiritual reality; but if this fellowship is real, it must, so long as we are in the flesh, be given physical expression as the opportunity arises. That is, the heavenly, metaphorical though real church or gathering round Christ, must manifest itself in local churches of Christ, each one of which is complete, for Christ is present according to his promise and his people are present. It is therefore the true gathering of Christ, lacking nothing, its members having been drawn into one another's company by the Spirit of Christ who indwells each member of Christ, in order to meet with Christ in one another and to give visible expression to the unity we all have in Christ and to experience the fellowship of being in Christ's presence in heaven.

So, the visible church of Christ is a gathering, that is a congregation, of believing people where the pure word of God is preached and the sacraments duly administered. Membership of the heavenly church is a present experience—not merely an eschatological one. The epistle to the Hebrews says 'You have come . . .' [not 'will come'] '. . . to the heavenly Jerusalem and to the church of the first born (that is of God's people) enrolled in heaven' (Heb 12:22–24). I might add that this heavenly church is the meaning of the phrase 'the catholic church' where it first occurs in Christian literature (Ignatius Smyr.8). This is quite clear from the context, as well as from the longer recension of the letter, and is also plainly the meaning of the words in the Creed 'I believe in the holy catholic church', a heavenly church which expresses itself locally as the fellowship of God's people, or put archaically, the communion of saints.

This heavenly, holy, catholic church is one. It cannot be anything else; for Christ's gathering of his people round himself in heaven is one and must be. He cannot have two gatherings round himself in heaven. Ecumenicists are troubled by this word 'one'. They say in the Creed they believe in one church. But they acknowledge it does not exist. They see many denominations, which they think are churches, because they are called churches. Denominations are organizations, which came into being to assist the expression of the fellowship which churches should have towards each other, but they have come to depress the fellowship in the churches or congregations, by usurping the ministries these congregations should exercise within themselves under the ministry of the word of God and prayer. Ecumenists strive to amalgamate the denominations, thinking that this will be the fulfilment of Christ's prayer that his people might be one in the Father and the Son, but this oneness is the result of the indwelling of

the Spirit. It already exists. We should be giving better expression to it by accepting one another across the denominations.

The unity which Christ prayed for is a spiritual unity, that those who believe might be one in him and in the Father, just as the Father is in the Son and the Son in him. This prayer was fulfilled at Pentecost when the Father sent the Spirit in response to Jesus' prayer. How can this inward spiritual unity, which is a real experience, be compared with organizational unity, which has its *raison d'être* in the outward? The more ecumenists pursue this false goal, the greater the errors their followers will fall into. In particular this striving to fulfil Christ's prayer for unity, by aiming at the amalgamation of the denominations under the headship of bishops leads *eventually* to the seeking of a chief bishop or primate (as in the A.R.C.I.C. document). Such a world bishop will eventually gather jurisdiction to himself, as has happened in the past. Nothing can stop such a development except the clear recognition that the visible unity of the church is not to be sought in organizational unity. If the fellowship of the congregation is to be true spiritual fellowship, the congregation must have responsibility for its own spiritual life, just as the family has responsibility for its Christian fellowship.

However, there is one very important thing that needs doing immediately to strengthen the fellowship of the local congregation and fellowship in Christ with one another. Fellowship in the congregation springs from fellowship in the home. Fellowship in Christ in the home and in the congregation is based on *knowledge* of Christ, of the Triune God. Knowledge springs from being taught the word of God and transmits itself into friendship with God. Increase in the knowledge of God in the congregations and in the homes is the greatest need. It only takes one or two generations of inadequate teaching for all knowledge of God to evaporate. There is no substitute for teaching. Paul taught the whole counsel of God in three years at Ephesus. Jesus was called 'teacher' and called himself 'teacher'. One gets one's surname from one's activity. The clergyman is to be 'apt to teach' for this is his ministry. He is a teacher of the word of God, publicly and privately from house to house. The ordained clergy should be encouraged to maintain a biblical teaching ministry. The pre-requisite for teaching is study. Jesus began to teach at the age of 30. It is plain he spent a lot of time learning before that. Ministers must make time for continuing study all through their ministry. Many clergy do not know that their ministry is to teach. Otherwise, the readings of scripture in the worship of the church would not be delegated to those unable to read publicly, as is so often the case. Nor would the church's young people be removed from the service to take part in Sunday school. Parents should be taught that they should teach their children the Christian faith. This is more important than giving children their meals. But what will they teach

Churchman

them if they know nothing more than what they get in many sermons, or even go out with the children before the sermon? In the worship of the church, God's word to us (including the sermon) should occupy at least as much time as our words to him!

All true Christian activity is based on true teaching. That is, all Christian ministry is derived from and depends on the primary ministry of those whom Christ sends as teachers in his church, for example, the evangelist preaches what he has been taught, the father and mother in the home teach their children what they have been taught, those who encourage and those who exhort their fellow Christians do so on the basis of what they have been taught. Christ gives teachers to his congregations; there is no distinction between a pastor and a teacher in the Christian ministry. The great task of a Palestinian shepherd (that is, pastor) was to supply the flock with food, leading it from pasture to pasture. The food of God's people is the word of God, publicly from the pulpit, privately in personal situations. But teaching without prayer will miss the mark.

DAVID BROUGHTON KNOX is the Founding Principal of the Theological College of the Church of England in South Africa.