

# Theology and Reunion

BY "AMOS"

THE World Council of Churches is this summer holding a meeting of learned representatives of many Churches at Evanston. They are to consider together the measure of agreement and the points of difference in their understanding of the Christian doctrine of Hope. One good thing about such a meeting is the implicit recognition that common theological conviction, or at least mutual theological understanding, is indispensable to realized fellowship.

Yet the very desire to achieve outward unity among the Churches, on the one hand, and the difficulties and delays likely to be caused by the depth of theological differences, on the other hand, themselves create a possible danger. For they tend to entice some enthusiasts for reunion to find or devise theological forms of words, which are sufficiently comprehensive and undefined to satisfy the greatest number. This involves inevitably either a refusal to make clear distinction or go below the surface, or a readiness to regard as optional and secondary articles of the faith which the Biblical evangelical must regard as primary and indispensable to any worthy Christian confession and communion. If we are, therefore, both to share in the ambitions, and avoid the perils, of such a movement, we do well to make ourselves consider the indispensable place of an adequate and clearly defined Biblical theology in any reunion movement which is likely to prove worthy and enduring.

## I

Doubtless to many the two words 'theology' and 'reunion' suggest two different and opposite interests, which have little in common and which are scarcely likely to flourish together. For to become theological suggests—to become theoretical, academic, doctrinaire, removed from contact with reality, out of touch with life, to give oneself up to cold, hard and barren intellectualism, to technical terminology, to profitless arguing, to endless hair-splitting, to forbidding prohibitions. Whereas, on the other hand, to become an enthusiast for reunion is to be positive and practical and really constructive, to be warmhearted, sympathetic, a champion of goodwill, out for fellowship, truly charitable; it is to become a person truly concerned to see Christ's prayer answered that His followers may all be one that the world may believe that God did send Him.

Perhaps few who are likely to read this article would fully endorse the extreme view, that these two interests are mutually exclusive. Rather are we prepared to recognize that each interest has its place. But there we stop, as those who stand in between, with a measure of interest in both, but without any really compelling devotion to either. Probably what most of us are blind to, or fail to see at its full force, is the fact that these two interests, far from being mutually exclusive, are in all vital Christianity inseparably related the one to the other. For

theology is indeed profitless unless it leads to love of the brethren. Faith without works is dead ; and faith works by love. Only if we love can we know that we are of the truth. Active love is the indispensable credential of a true theology. While, on the other hand, we cannot be sound in charity, in other words our love will not be in a healthy condition, unless we are first sound in doctrine. For the wisdom that is from above is first pure, and then peaceable.

We need, therefore, to yoke the two interests together and to be devoted to both. Also, our devotion to them should be in this order—that is, first to theology, and then to reunion. It is not good enough just to be a friendly well-wisher of reunion. We live in days when there is an increasing demand that our interest should be active and constructive. But before we act, we shall do well to stop and consider how to act rightly ; and to learn this, we must turn to theology. For every art has its corresponding science ; every practice has its underlying theory. The man who can do most with a machine, and certainly the man who can best mend it when it is out of order, is the man who knows most about how it works. So, those who would promote reunion ought also to become expert in theology.

When men wish to erect a building there are two things which they do first. They have plans drawn by an architect to provide a design to which the actual builders may work. And, before they build upwards, they dig downwards to lay a foundation on which the erection may stand. Only theology can provide both the design and the foundation for the construction of Christian reunion. Therefore, to attempt to promote reunion without theology is like joining in a work of construction without any clear idea of how the building is to be put together. Such workmen who merely mean well, and try to help, but fail to work to the architect's design, will never construct a building which is a unity in itself. To attempt to promote reunion without theology is also—like the foolish man in our Lord's parable—to erect a building without a foundation, which will fall to pieces before the storms, which are certain soon to beat upon it, and put it to the test.

## II

Words are an instrument necessary to personal communication. Only by their use can one individual so express his thoughts as to make them intelligible to another. Further, where careful and exact definition is desirable, where fine points of difference have to be distinguished, not only are words indispensable, but also words used in a particular or technical sense. In the realm of religion in the expression of thoughts about God, when words are so used in this more technical way, one has inevitably the beginnings of a theology. For the man who would think, and then communicate his thoughts, some theology is inevitable.

If words are thus necessary to communication between persons, much more are they necessary to co-operation among persons. If I am to get the other man to support my action, or to act with me, I must tell him, and tell him clearly, what I am going to do and what I want him to do, and vice versa. Further, if such co-operation or united action is to be a sustained activity, and still more if it is to be

maintained not simply by two people but by large numbers, it must be guided and regulated, not only by words spoken spontaneously at the time according to the need, but also by words expressed more carefully and systematically beforehand to define what we may call the rules of the game, or, better still, the laws of the new spiritual nature. Also, while the spirit of co-operation and the true spirit of the game are both necessary to crown the activity with success, yet, unless the participants will observe the rules, they cannot play the game or live the life together at all.

To apply this principle to things Christian means that reunion, or the realization of united activity among Christians, is impossible of achievement apart from the acceptance of a common theology. There is, therefore—if we are to promote such union—need of an authority which all accept as decisive. This authority can only be that of the Lord and His Spirit. But, if its practical implications and detailed applications are to commend themselves to every man's conscience, and to provide an adequate guide to daily conduct, there must be more exact or systematic definition, there must be some objective expression in a form which everyone can understand, and to which everyone can appeal. In other words, Christians need a rule of faith. They need some authoritative and generally accepted expression of articles of faith and standards of conduct. They need a full and strong theology, clearly and adequately defined.

It was, for instance, of such a theology that the authors of the great Reformation confessions realized that they were in need, if they were to deliver men from the prevalent corruption of the Christian religion, and to unite them in loyalty to revealed truth. Yet it is just such full and unequivocal theological definition that some present-day enthusiasts for reunion are out to avoid at all costs. They even argue against such theology as a cause of disruption rather than of union. They assert that loyalty to a person unites, but that doctrines sooner or later divide. But this is a misleading antithesis. Loyalties to persons also divide. He that is not for Christ is against Him. Also, doctrines, when clearly understood, and wholeheartedly accepted by all, can help to increase the depth and effectiveness of union and co-operation; just as actual or supposed theological differences have been, and still are, the cause of the deepest and most enduring divisions within the Christian Church.

### III

Theology is, therefore, for the Christian no optional extra. It is indispensable to his life and still more to its fulness. To begin with, the personal action by which an individual becomes a Christian is theological. Simon became Peter, a living stone in the Temple of the Church, by becoming theological. He confessed of Jesus, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God". None can join this blessed company except by this road. Paul obviously asserts that theology is unavoidable when he says, "If thou shalt confess with thy mouth Jesus as Lord and believe in thine heart that God hath raised Him from the dead, thou shalt be saved". Primitive Christianity was intensely doctrinal. The New Testament test of a true Christian is theological.

Only he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God come in the flesh, only he that believeth that Jesus is the Christ and the Lord, is of God and has the life eternal. What is the power of God unto salvation is not just the fact of the Cross, but the word and the preaching of the Cross, or, in other words, the theology of the Cross.

Although men are saved by personal response to Christ as a living Saviour, they must of necessity respond to Him intelligibly as being of a certain character in Himself, and in relation both to God and to sinful men. Therefore such faith soon expresses itself as "the faith". The believer, who thus commits himself to Christ, is inevitably committing himself to certain doctrines about Him. The testimony of the new convert is the utterance of a new-born theologian! If he is to grow, his theology must grow too, from its limited and even childish beginnings to full-orbed maturity. The mistake of some, the weakness of their so-called Christianity, is just here that the Christ they know is not sufficiently theological to be the true Christ of God. He is not the Christ of the Scriptural revelation.

Much more is it true that, if Christians are to realize their oneness in Christ, their action must be theological. For by nature men are heterogeneous—Jew and Greek, male and female, bond and free. They can only become one "in Christ Jesus"; and that bond of unity is theological. This is how the first Christians realized a new fellowship—by continuing in the Apostles' doctrine. They did not just follow the same leaders. They all accepted the same teaching. The Apostles had authority and were followed because they were the trustees of our Lord's teaching. Also they knew what Christ had done: and they were inspired of the Spirit to be the theological interpreters of its significance.

Again, a full theology alone can give to Christians a true conception of the character and conditions of the unity which they should strive to realize and to preserve. For instance, the true Church has by credal definition four marks. She is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. These features are interdependent. Full realized unity is a consummation, a crowning rather than an initial characteristic. Since truth and purity are essential to mature and healthy vitality, the Church cannot become truly one and catholic unless she is first apostolic in faith and holy in life. It is the great mistake of the Roman attitude to reverse this order and to assert that the Church must be recognized by its oneness and catholicity rather than by its apostolic doctrine and holy living.

Similarly in other directions the Roman view is unbalanced and therefore fatal to true unity. They regard the ministry as apostolic rather than the Church and her doctrine. They put stress on order rather than on faith. They make the whole subservient to the part, and the external more indispensable than the internal. They make the ministers of Christ the lords of the Church rather than her servants. They test unity by earthly relationship to a head geographically localized in one spot, and so removed from all but one local congregation, instead of by the spiritual Presence of Christ Himself, promised as it is to every local congregation of true believers. Such unbalanced claims produced at the time of the Reformation an inevitable theo-

logical revolt, and indeed a return to the norm. Our reformers were prepared to recognize and realize communion with other groups of Christians, not in terms of common orders or of a common Pope, but on the basis of common doctrine. Those who are already one in faith and doctrine, can and ought to learn to be one in charity and fellowship.

It is from this proper theological basis of true Christian fellowship that there has been a widespread departure. Some have regarded theology as a hindrance to reunion and disregarded it. Others have made minor points of theological disagreement a reason for needless division among believers, who are really one on major doctrines, and who ought to be vitally one in Christ. There has been, on the one hand, a loss of the sense of perspective through lack of a full-orbed theology, and, on the other hand, a tendency to be deluded by sentiment and fanciful dreams, which stir desire and hope for much more than they have any power to produce. We can hope to advance towards fuller unity only if, on the one hand, we return to a proper respect for the fundamental importance of doctrine; and if, on the other hand, we regain a full enough view of Christian doctrine as a whole to be saved from the peril of separation from our brethren over points that are only of minor importance.

Christians can agree to differ, without needing to walk apart, when the Truth which holds their common loyalty is bigger than the points of Truth which they so far see differently. But there can be no safe or Christian advance towards greater unity if we regard a full clearly defined Biblical theology as undesirable or unimportant. For it is wrong to make Christian reunion an end in itself. Christians should only strive towards it as a means to a greater end—the glory of God; that is, as Christ prayed, that the world may believe that God did send Him. And that end is theological. Therefore, unless we have an ambition which is theological in its goal as well as in its foundations, we cannot strive for true Christian reunion at all.

#### IV

This general truth, that right theology is indispensable to true reunion, may be well illustrated by reference to some doctrines more in detail. Christology is, for instance, of primary importance. Christ Himself is, of course, the only centre of living unity. But it is impossible to hold fast to Him without being theological. It is, for instance, impossible to have Christian union with Unitarians. There must be some indispensable standard by which to decide who or what is Christian.

Next, as already indicated, we cannot pursue in practical detail the Christian loyalty without some objective guidance or standards of reference. So the believing acceptance of the God-inspired Scriptures as the rule of faith is a practical necessity. We must hold fast to the Christ of the Bible. This is only possible if we accept the testimony of the Scriptures and use it theologically to determine right creed and conduct. One may compare the use and technical understanding of the musical score by members of an orchestra, from which they gain, not only an understanding of the conductor's control and of the character of their own contribution, but also both a recognition of the

different but equally desirable contributions of other players, and an appreciation of the larger harmony to which every contribution is indispensable. In addition, they gain a standard other and higher than mere personal preference by which to judge what contributions are in place, and what out of place, in the work of the orchestra as a whole.

Again, effective co-operation in evangelism is impossible without the same views about the need, and the right treatment, of those to whom we preach. This is the more true because it is the function of the Christian Gospel to provide the diagnosis as well as the remedy of man's condition. Disagreement here makes co-operation in any deep work quite impossible. So some united efforts are very superficial.

Further, if Christianity is an historic faith, if our very *raison d'être* is the intervention of God in history, how can we be united in belief or witness except in so far as we are agreed in our interpretation of the facts, that is, in our theology? So doctrines such as those of the Atonement and of Justification by faith are of supreme importance. How can we be reconciled to one another, or unite to preach the word of reconciliation, if we do not share the same convictions concerning the way of our own reconciliation to God?

Similarly, Christian worship as well as Christian witness can only be a true outgoing of the soul if its activity is informed and inspired by a theology. Between the ideas of coming to an altar to offer the sacrifice of the Mass, and of coming boldly to the throne of grace to receive mercy, between the idea that a priest is necessary to mediate grace and the conception that all now have equal access to the holiest of all, there is nothing less than fundamental difference. We shall never unite hearts in true response Godwards if we treat these differences merely as differences of outward form. As forms of worship they are not different ways of saying the same thing; rather they say radically different things.

Finally, and most important of all, the New Testament hope of unity among Christians is in basis theological. In Ephesians 4. 1-16 when Paul pleads for unity he becomes theological. It is our common theology which should make us one. We are to come to a perfect man in the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God. Negatively, we must not be carried about with every wind of doctrine; we must have a theological stability. This theology, too, must find active expression in life. No dead or barren orthodoxy will do. We must speak the truth in love, and our daily conduct must become more Christlike, if we are to grow to maturity, and if every joint is to supply its share to the life of the one body. Similarly, in 1 John, "fellowship with us" is only possible to those who have heard and received the Christian message; and this message is explicitly indicated to be highly theological. Those who would receive it must believe in the Father and His Son Jesus Christ, in Jesus Christ come in the flesh, and in the blood which cleanses us from all sin.

## V

We are, therefore, fully Scriptural both in order and in hope when, in using the prayer for the Church Militant in the Prayer Book, we

beseech God "to inspire continually the universal Church with the spirit of truth, unity and concord", and to "grant that all they that do confess Thy holy Name, may agree in the truth of Thy holy Word, and (so) live in unity and godly love".

Also, this order of spiritual progress, which begins in loyalty to the truth, and is fulfilled in the love of the brethren, follows the divine pattern for the Church and its unceasing enlargement. "This is His commandment that we should believe on the Name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, as He gave us commandment" (1 John iii. 23). As we do love one another in this way, the world (those still outside our fellowship) will move towards us. They will and must come by the only possible way into the fellowship, first to share our theology—to believe that God did send Christ—and then by the inspiration and outworking of this faith themselves to share in the life of brotherly love. There is, therefore, no way into Christian unity for either insider or outsider except by the way of loyalty to the Christian theology. Only as we fully believe on the Name of His Son Jesus Christ shall we fully love one another as He gave us commandment.

## Eschatology and Evanston

BY THE REV. F. D. COGGAN, M.A., D.D.

IT was a sound instinct—or may we rather believe the guiding of the Holy Spirit?—which led the leaders of the World Council of Churches to take as the theme of their forthcoming Assembly at Evanston, *Christ—The Hope of the World*. The Assembly could scarcely take place at a time when the commodity of hope was in shorter supply in the world than it is now. Despair reigns. It was typified in a recent letter to *The Times*, in which the writer told of the boy aged eleven who, on being asked what he was going to do when he grew up, replied: "Sir, I need not worry, as by that time there will be nowhere to grow up on". If St. Paul's delineation of the first century world was correct when he described it as "without God and without hope", how true is that description of multitudes of our contemporaries to-day! A world which has largely abandoned the trinity of Christian virtues, faith, hope and love, finds that it can no longer exist on the capital of spiritual wealth inherited from a bygone generation. Spiritual bankruptcy stares it in the face. A great question-mark shapes itself out of the mushroom growth of an atomic- and hydrogen-bomb explosion.

The Christian Church, meanwhile, takes stock. What is to be the special note of its message in such an age? Clearly, eschatology has come to the fore, in a way and with an urgency quite unparalleled a generation or so ago. An age which can comfortably believe in an