

A different perspective on the Anglican Methodist Formal Conversations

It is with great heaviness of heart that I feel obliged to set out this different perspective on the Formal Conversations between the Methodist and the Church of England. I have appreciated the opportunity to be included as a member of these Conversations and for the willingness of the co-Chairmen to permit me to express some of my concerns as we have met. These concerns related chiefly to misunderstandings about early Methodist history, the lack of precision on areas of doctrinal controversy between the Churches and the enshrining of views on both the doctrines of the priesthood and the episcopate which seemed contrary to the New Testament. I can certainly testify to the gracious attitudes of members of the group when expressing reservations or disagreement with my views. **However for the reasons that I will briefly set out I cannot in good conscience subscribe to the Common Statement which the group has produced.** Though much of it is accurate in its description of our two denominations, it sets out an understanding of the Church and Church unity which I believe is foreign to the New Testament and therefore which I cannot support. My plan is to set out in extremely abbreviated form some of the New Testament guidelines from Paul's letter to the Ephesians which should shape our understanding of the Church and, as we proceed, to interact at a number of points with some of the positions adopted by the Common Statement.

1. The Church is God's Church

I believe it is important at the outset to recognise that the Church is created through the gracious plan and purpose of God for the glory of God. Primarily we must see the Church not from a human perspective but from God's. In Ephesians Chapters 1-3 we see the Church predestined out of God's love (1:4,5), redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ (1:7,8) and finding its ultimate fulfilment under the

headship of Christ (1:9,10). As a new temple, the Church as God's people are built on the foundation of the teaching of the apostles and prophets with Christ himself as the chief cornerstone (2:19,20) and it becomes a building indwelt by God's Spirit (2:21,22). The Church within God's sovereign purposes becomes a means of demonstrating God's wisdom (3:10) an instrument to display His glory (3:20,21). All this demonstrates how we should look on God's Church. It is not a purely human institution but it is a people who have their roots in God's predestined purposes and grace and their end or goal in furthering God's glory.

2. The Church of God already enjoys unity

We wrestle with a multitude of divisions between and within our denominations (and it is often the divisions within a denomination that are the deeper!). However though Churches in New Testament times exhibited differences, for example in Church government, the apostolic writers didn't see the need to pursue organic unity between Churches. Rather, they proclaimed Church unity as a fact revealing that the way that they primarily thought about the Church was theocentric rather than in institutional terms. The New Testament pattern is to start with the cross and show how it has brought reconciliation between all believers (the Church) and God and how it has also brought reconciliation between believers (see Ephesians 2:14-18). As Paul says in Ephesians 4:3, there already is an unity of the Spirit. The Church is one body (Ephesians 4:4) with one hope of glory revealed in the Gospel. Those who are believers within Methodism are already united with those who are believers within the Church of England. Of course there may be good reasons to pursue greater co-operation at all sorts of levels but such actions cannot bring greater unity in the Spirit between Christians in our two denominations.

3. The basis of the Church's unity

It can be seen therefore that the unity of God's Church must not be based on extraneous factors. Though I value episcopacy as the doctrine is presented to us in the New Testament, what is known as "the historic episcopate" has little or nothing to do with the unity of the Spirit. It may be an outward sign of institutional unity, but that may have little bearing on the true unity of the Church. The true unity of the Church is granted in the relationship of all genuine Christians to one God. As a parent with a number of children has one family, so the unity of the Church is guaranteed by the unity of the Godhead - Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In the context of Ephesians 4:3 it is interesting to see Paul stressing this point in vs.4-6. Because there is one God, one Lord and one Spirit there is an unity already given to the Church. Therefore although it may be an extremely helpful thing for two denominations to embrace episcopacy together as a practical means of expressing their unity, it is quite another thing for both denominations to be required to embrace "the historic episcopate" as a necessary means for establishing their unity.

4. The importance of "one faith"

Having seen that there is only one body derived from one God it is not surprising that there is only one faith and one baptism (Ephesians 4:5). In other words there is only one entrance into the Church which is through faith in Jesus Christ as revealed in the Gospel message. So Paul is referring to the existence of certain truths about the work of Christ and its effects. This points to the Church as being a confessional body. How can you have faith in Jesus Christ without knowledge of "the faith" as an objective set of truths concerning the doctrines of the Gospel?

It is true that our grasp of "the faith" (used in an objective sense) is never going to be perfect in this life which is why, though we are to maintain the unity of the Spirit (4:3), we are encouraged to attain to

the unity of the faith (4:13). Hence the importance in Paul's argument of vs. 7-12 with the provision by Christ's grace of people raised up to teach and handle God's word faithfully so that the Church can press on towards a greater maturity of understanding (4:13). As such unity of the faith is gradually attained so there is a greater ability to stand against false teaching which would threaten the unity of the faith (4:14-16). It can be seen then that the first priority of discussions between denominations is to strive for the unity of the faith such that doctrines which are now seen to be not consonant with the New Testament are discarded.

5. The "one faith" and the Common Statement

It is at this point that I found greatest difficulty with the Formal Conversations. I see a number of things which do not seem to be consonant with the New Testament in both our Churches. This presents us with the opportunity to attain towards the unity of the faith as such teachings and practices are noted and some are then discarded by comparing the two Churches and recognising our own deficiencies in the light of the teaching and practices held by the other, insofar as that other Church is following scripture more faithfully.

Looking at the Church of England (no doubt with very blinkered eyes) I see a number of practices which when compared with Methodist practice appear to fall into this category. For example Methodists have practiced Lay presidency/administration at the Communion Service for many years. With the safeguards around to ensure that such services are performed in an appropriate manner and by those recognised as Lay Leaders within the Church's structures, I see no reason why this is not an area where the Church of England can broaden her understanding and practice. Similarly with the Methodist practice of presbyteral confirmation. Since other episcopally ordered denominations also have presbyteral confirmation it seems unfortunate that there has not been a greater willingness for the Church of England to embrace such a change.

Looking at the Methodist church the two areas where I have expressed some concern relate to her Arminian doctrine and to Wesley's view of "Christian perfection". Neither, I would hold, can stand up to careful scrutiny against the standards of Scripture and yet both doctrines remain within the official teaching of the Methodist Church.

- a. Concerning the issue of predestination, Scripture (e.g. Ephesians 1:4,5,11) and the 39 Articles (Article 17) are quite clear. Article 17 may appear to some to be a moderate statement of predestination but it is clearly a statement which Wesley and Methodism have been unwilling to adhere. This can be shown to be a fault line at the very beginning of Methodism in 1740 (when all the 'Methodists' were also members of the Church of England). Wesley's sermon "Free Grace" (1739) attacked these doctrines and set out an Arminian position. George Whitefield published a reply in 1740 which highlighted the deficiencies of Wesley's position. As a result though many Methodists followed Wesley and later formed the denomination which became Methodism, many early Methodists remained with Whitefield but felt no need to leave the Church of England (many of this grouping flowing into the Evangelical Party of the late 18th Century). [For Whitefield's reply see "George Whitefield's Journals" Banner of faith, Edinburgh, 1960 pp563-588].
- b. Concerning the doctrine of "Total love" or "Christian perfection" again studying Ephesians provides an answer to Wesley's position. Ephesians 4:25-32 clearly highlights the reality of indwelling sin in the life of the believer, and though the motivation of Wesley to encourage holiness of life must be applauded, it is still appropriate to question whether his teaching is biblical. Jim Packer in "Keep in step with the Spirit" [IVP, Leicester, 1984 p145] provides a thorough

analysis of the issue and whilst recognising Wesley's noble concerns, concludes: "I conclude, then, that Wesley's doctrine of present perfection wrought here and now by the Holy Spirit in response to faith cannot be found in the New Testament. Total love, wholly free from any admixture of simple and self-seeking motivation, is heaven's promised life, but it is not attained here on earth, however far in love to God and men a believer is enabled to go. To teach Christians to infer from any present state of spiritual exaltation that sinful desire is now all permanently gone from them is a damaging mistake; the inference is false, and those who draw it, thereby sentence themselves to some degree of moral and spiritual unreality".

My point in looking at these two issues is that from Ephesians 4 we see that though the unity of the Spirit is given to all believers, we are to work at attaining an unity of the faith. However to organise and engineer a structural Church unity without any regard to dealing with issues of doctrinal belief or practice is a faulty way of handling these important issues. Such a structural 'unity' will only paper over the cracks leaving a much greater 'disunity in the faith' underneath. Church unity proposals that do not deal with issues of doctrine in such a way that these doctrines are brought more into line with the Scriptures, do not actually advance unity as seen by God.

6. How should we proceed.

i. We need to be clear about what we mean by 'Church'

The reformers used the distinction between the visible and the invisible Church. This does not refer to two Churches but to two aspects of the one Church, what it looks like to the eyes of men and women, and what it looks like to the eyes of God, who looks on the heart. Since the Church is a fellowship of those who have been united in Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit what constitutes the Church is not any of its outward features whether it be the historic episcopate, papacy, institutional means of grace etc. Rather

the only thing that constitutes the Church is the reality of faith in the Jesus Christ of the Gospel through God's grace. Faith in Christ by the Spirit leading to the forgiveness of sins and the hope of eternal life are all primary. Yet because none of things are visible to us, the Church which they bring into being is not visible either. Luther stated that the Holy Catholic Church of the Creeds is an object, not of sight, but of faith. The Church then becomes visible as a local outcrop of God's one Church where faith in the Gospel of Christ is being evidenced. Hence Article 19 says "The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in the which the pure Word of God is preached and the sacraments be duly ministered according to Christ's ordinance in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same". Thus the Church becomes visible not by its adherence to the historic episcopate (or other institutional features) but by professing and proclaiming the apostolic gospel through word and sacraments.

ii. We need to pursue a greater unity in the faith.

I hope that I have been able to show, however inadequately, that this is the key issue and one which the current Formal Conversations has not really sought to address. To argue that there is probably greater disagreement within our denominations than between them must not be seen as a way of opting out of the task of seeking the unity of faith at all levels. To repeat my earlier point, Christians already possess a God given unity of the Spirit and it is to an unity of the faith that we must strive as we confess error and appropriate Biblical truth wherever we see it in others, as we continually learn from the Scriptures. The cry of the reformation was that the Church continually needs to be reformed (in a Biblical direction!) and that is what we must be seeking to do at all levels in both denominations and together in Formal Conversations.

I hope in saying all this that I am not misheard to mean that grim-faced, doctrinal battles are the way forward. Again Ephesians 4 gives us the context of how we strive for the unity of the faith. At the start of the Chapter Paul encourages his readers "to be

completely humble and gentle: be patient, bearing with one another in love" (4:2). At the end of this section he speaks of the need to speak the truth in love (4:15). It is not just the institutional barriers that must be removed but doctrinal clarity and agreement is to be sought through patient, gracious, loving and humble Christians working together. Biblical ecumenism is all about speaking the truth revealed in the Scripture in love, such that we are fashioned more and more by the inspired Word of God.

7. Conclusion

From what I have very inadequately expressed, it is clear that I cannot support the method or the conclusions of the Common Statement. It is also a source of regret that though I had requested that my disagreement be noted within the Report, this has not been done and therefore I have tried to set out my concerns so that others, more theologically articulate than I, may be able to provide us with a fully Biblical model concerning how we should relate to different denominations in our day.

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