

REPLY TO THE LAMBETH 'OUTLINE OF A REUNION SCHEME' (1939)

The Outline of a Reunion Scheme for the Church of England and the Evangelical Free Churches of England is a document which was drafted in this form by the Committee of the Joint Conference of Anglicans and Free Churchmen meeting at Lambeth, and was published in February 1938. The Joint Conference 'generally commended' it to the careful consideration of the Churches.

The *Outline* thus commended has received the careful consideration of the Committee on Faith and Order, which has had the advantage of consultation with the Methodist members of the Joint Conference, and now recommends the Methodist Conference to adopt the following report:

(1) The Methodist Conference has already set forth its belief, in *The Nature of the Christian Church, according to the Teaching of the Methodists*, that in the New Testament Church there was an inward unity of the Spirit which was outwardly expressed in common worship, a common message, the acceptance both of a common mission, and of all those varied ministries for the discharge of that mission with which God endowed His Church on earth. The Conference has deplored as disastrous the breaches of fellowship which have destroyed the outward unity of the Church, and has declared that the denominations or 'Churches' of today form but a partial and imperfect embodiment of the New Testament ideal. 'They are already one in Christ Jesus. . . . But it is their duty to make common cause in the search for the perfect expression of that unity and holiness which in Christ are already theirs.'

The Conference, therefore, cannot do other than receive with gratitude and respect this *Outline of a Reunion Scheme*, which seeks an end to which the Conference is already pledged.

(2) The Methodist Conference considers that the *Outline* should be studied in the light of its opening section, 'the Purpose of the Scheme,' and earnestly commends these paragraphs to the consideration of the Methodist people.

'This scheme is drafted in the belief that it is the will of God that in this world the spiritual unity of His Church should be manifested in a visible society, holding the one faith, having its recognised ministry, using God-given means of grace and inspiring all its members to the world-wide service of the Kingdom of God.'

'It rests upon the conviction that the unity of the Church is involved in the Christian Doctrine of God, and is demanded for the manifestation and achievement of his purpose. As there is one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of us all, so there must be one Body, one Fellowship of the people of God on earth, seen of all men; for it is the purpose of God not only to reconcile all men through Christ to Himself, but also to unite them to one another in the Body of Christ.'

‘The divisions among Christian people everywhere disable them from serving God according to the will of Christ and obstruct His purpose to win and rule over men.’

‘This disunion debars us from giving our torn and distracted world effective witness to the truth that the Gospel of Christ is the basis of enduring fellowship among men and nations. Similarly it confuses and weakens the presentation and imperils the acceptance of our Christian message, especially in the mission field. The continuance of this disunion involves a waste which is sinful, inasmuch as it hinders the work of God.’

These words have been powerfully reinforced by the World Missionary Conference recently held at Madras. The representatives of the younger Churches declared that:

‘Visible and organic unity must be our goal. This, however, will require an honest study of those things in which the Churches have differences, a widespread teaching of the common church membership in things that made for union, and venturesome sacrifice on the part of all.’¹

(3) The Methodist Conference gratefully acknowledges the extraordinary skill and care, as well as the deep-seated charity and the passionate desire for the visible unity of the Church of God, which are evident in the *Outline of a Reunion Scheme*. It recognises that in this document a necessary distinction is drawn between:

- (a) Any scheme for the *interim* period, which would extend from the time when the Churches decide to unite to the final achievement of the united Church, and
- (b) This particular Scheme, which suggests a constitution for a completely united Church.

With regard to (a), the *interim* period, the *Outline* says little.

‘It is fully recognised’ that arrangements for this period ‘are of primary importance, but they belong to the stage of actual negotiation which has not yet been reached.’

But the Conference notes that:

‘All persons who . . . have been admitted as communicants by any of the services of admission which were in use in any of the uniting Churches before union shall be recognised as communicants throughout the united Church of England.’

The Conference further observes that while it is proposed that:

‘some presbyters from each of the non-episcopal Churches shall be chosen for consecration as bishops . . . all the other ministers of the uniting Churches who have been ordained as ministers of the Word and of the Sacraments would be acknowledged as such, and would have the status of presbyters in the united Church, provided that they assent to the basis of union and accept the constitution of the Church.’

The Conference notes that no re-ordination would be required, and recognises the care taken to secure that there should be no disowning of past ministries of Word and

¹ *The World Mission of the Church*, Tamparam, 1938, p. 155.

Sacrament received otherwise than by episcopal ordination. The Conference welcomes the emphatic statement (p.15) that such ministries, together with those received by episcopal ordination, have been used and blessed by the Spirit of God.

With regard to (b), the Scheme for a completely united Church, the Conference notices three leading principles: (1) The *Outline* is a genuine attempt to show how it may be possible to combine in one body those who differ in their forms of worship without any demand that any form of worship which has been in use in any of the uniting Churches shall be forbidden in the united Church. (2) Another guiding principle is that all the constituent groups and members of the united Church shall preserve such communion and fellowship with other Churches as they have enjoyed before the act of Union. (3) The *Outline* is an attempt to demonstrate how the characteristic features of Episcopal, Presbyterian and Congregational Church orders may be combined in one organisation.

These principles make it a valuable basis of discussion for those who are endeavouring to envisage a closer union of the separated Churches of England.

(4) The Methodist Conference recognises that criticism of details would be inappropriate at this stage. But two general comments may be made.

(a) The Scheme, skilful as it is, contemplates a Church which in its organisation would be too completely unified. The constitution lays undue stress on uniformity of government. While allowing for variety in modes of worship and providing adequate safeguards against the alteration of forms of worship to which a congregation is accustomed, it does not sufficiently allow for the free exercise of those differing forms of government and organisation which have been granted to the various Churches in their separated existence. The denominational organisations in their long history have proved their effectiveness within the one Church of God. The Methodist Church has built up a certain order and discipline in its attempt to discharge its mission of evangelism and of 'spreading Scriptural holiness' throughout the world. Methodists are still profoundly conscious of an unexhausted mission; and it is difficult at present for them to contemplate a step that is apparently postulated by this scheme, the disappearance of the Methodist Conference, with all the disciplined and organised life which has centred in that body. Thus, for example, in the Methodist system the selection, training, ordination, and discipline of ministers are conspicuously acts of the whole Church through its controlling assembly, the Conference. In the *Outline* these functions are transferred to the Diocesan Synod.

It may not prove impossible to find some other expression of that ideal of 'unity with variety' which avowedly inspires this *Outline*. Perhaps each of the uniting communions might at first be recognised as semi-autonomous within the united Church, each with its own discipline and forms of government, but each submitting to and honouring the authority of the whole body (expressed in some way yet to be determined), as controlling the aims and developing life of every part.

(b) *The Outline of a Reunion Scheme* recommends the acceptance of episcopal ordination as the way by which union may be secured.

'in view of the fact that the Episcopate was accepted from early times and for many centuries, and by the greater part of Christendom is still accepted, as the means whereby the authority of the whole Church is given.'

At the same time it is made clear in the *Outline* that the ultimate authority in the united Church would be conciliar, and that the Episcopate would be a constitutional office.

‘The ultimate authority of the united Church resides in the harmony of bishops, presbyters, and laity.’ ‘Presbyters should be associated with the bishop in the ceremony of ordination and the laity should have a share in the process by which a candidate is approved for ordination.’

Moreover, the Scheme expressly states that such acceptance:

‘would not imply the disowning of past ministries of Word and Sacrament otherwise received, which have together with those received by episcopal ordination, been used and blessed by the Spirit of God.’

But it is at this point that difficulties arise, which, at least in part, affect doctrine as well as order. In certain parts of the world, notably in the United States of America, Methodism has made use of episcopacy as a valuable form of government. But the Methodist Church does not claim that either episcopacy or any form of organisation even in the Apostolic Church should be determinative for the Church for all time. It would not be able to accept Episcopacy and Episcopal ordination if such acceptance involved the admission that either of these is indispensable to the Church. Such a theory seems to the Conference to be without warrant in the New Testament, where order, important as it is, is never equated with faith, and to be contradicted by manifest facts in the history of the last four hundred years. In questions of order, as in the interpretation of doctrine, the united Church of the future should be free to trust in the promised guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Again, the Methodist Church is unable to accept the theory of Apostolic succession, interpreted as the succession of bishops in the principal sees of Christendom handing down and preserving the Apostles’ doctrine, and regarded, as in certain Churches it is regarded, as constituting the true and only guarantee of sacramental grace and right doctrine. The Conference notes that the *Outline* contains the explicit declaration (p. 15) that:

‘the acceptance of Episcopal ordination for the future . . . neither affirms nor excludes the view that Apostolic Succession determines the validity of the Ministry and Sacraments.’

The doctrine of Apostolic Succession, while permissible for individuals, would not be a dogma of the united Church. The Conference interprets this provision for the mutual tolerance of conflicting views in the light of the further provision, already noted above as a guiding principle of the *Outline*, that

‘the united Church of England desires in no way to impair the fellowship and communion which the constituent bodies from which it has been formed have previously enjoyed in England and throughout the world.’

Since the doctrine of Apostolic Succession would not be a dogma of the united Church, it should not in practice impair the fellowship and communion which the Free Churches already enjoy with other Churches in England and throughout the world.

(5) In view of the principles governing the *Outline*, the Methodist Conference would urge once again that nothing would do so much to manifest and to deepen the sense of unity in the Spirit, in the period before union can be consummated, and actually to hasten the consummation of union, as fellowship between the members of

the several Churches at the Table of their Lord. The Conference regards the failure to overcome our divisions in this way as a grave hindrance in our quest for closer union, and a scandal with deplorable results in the life and witness of the whole Church of God.

(6) The Methodist Conference, at this early stage of discussion, asks that, in any subsequent proposals, stronger emphasis shall be laid on the primary task of the Church, that of the evangelisation of the world, and also on the ministry of the laity, both men and women, in fulfilling that task. The Conference also urges that, in view of the unanimity shown both at the Lausanne World Conference in the statement on the *Church's Message to the World – the Gospel*, and at the Edinburgh World Conference, in the *Affirmation of Union in allegiance to our Lord Jesus Christ*, greater prominence should be given in any further discussions to the unity already given by God in the Gospel by which the Church lives.

(7) The Methodist Conference remits this Report to the Chairman of the Joint Conference, His Grace the Archbishop of Canterbury, to its Conveners, His Grace the Archbishop of York, and the Reverend Dr. A. E. Garvie, and also to the Federal Council of the Free Churches of England, in the hope that the Conversations will continue, and with the earnest prayer that God will grant to His Church that peace and unity which are agreeable to His will.

(Minutes 1939, pp. 428-32)