

THE NATURE OF SCHISM: HOW COMPLETE CAN IT EVER BE?:  
WHAT DOES IT DO?: HOW CAN IT BE HEALED?

In Christian theology the word schism may refer to a sin. It may also refer to a state of separation between two Christian groups.

As a sin, schism is the act by which a man separates himself from the visible fellowship of the Church. As in so many other instances, the culpability of this "sin" may vary from 100% to 0%. It should be noted that a man may be in a "state" of schism without any culpable act of his own; e.g. he may have been born and brought up outside the visible fellowship and, through no fault of his own, never recognised the objective wrongness of this state. Culpable sin is always a matter basically of "the heart" (in the biblical sense of that word); and "the sin of schism is already committed in the heart when we behave as though we were not an integral part of the whole with others".\*

Our concern is presumably primarily with schism as a state of separation between two Christian groups. Rarely does a Christian group come into existence from totally outside any previous grouping. Typical in England is the origin of Methodism, which began as a revival movement within the Church of England. Typical in the world is the "state of schism" between East and West called (by Fr. Congar) the "Oriental schism". These two great churches are

---

\* Congar, After Nine Hundred Years, p.89.

each in acknowledged continuity with the Catholic Church of antiquity.

Such being schism between Christian groups, we are asked: What is the nature of schism? This is a question not of "fact" but of theology: how should schism be understood theologically? The key question can be put this way: Is schism always "schism from the Church"; or can it be "schism within the Church"? \* That schism is always "from the Church" is a thesis that has very *great* traditional authority behind it. That it can be "within the Church" is a more recent view; it found vigorous expression in the Anglo-Catholic "branch theory" and is widely held in ecumenical circles and elsewhere today.

The decision between these two theologies of schism must depend on a theology of the Church, within or from which schism occurs or exists. Does the Bible or, failing that, tradition ("our common traditions") give us any light on the nature of the Church, so far as that nature is relevant to the question: what is the nature of schism?

The Bible presents the Church as a visible reality with an inward aspect. Apart from one reference to the heavenly Church, there are 109 occurrences of the word "church" in the New Testament.

---

\* Greenslade, Schism in the Early Church, 2nd ed., p.xxi: Bodies that base their worship on Scripture and place themselves "under" Scripture considered as the Word of God "are, corporately, within the Church" - and this though they are separated from each other.

In all these passages the Church is a visible reality.\* It may be noted that in the New Testament the word "church" frequently refers to a local community of Christians. It is, however, probable that these local groups earn the title church by being "representative" in their locality either of the "mother Church" of Jerusalem or of the superlocal visible reality that came to be called "the Catholic Church".

Whether or not the New Testament compels us to think that this superlocal church has a necessary "visible unity" is precisely the question that divides us. Rather than argue an answer here, I prefer to move on to "tradition", i.e. the history of Christian thought and practice down the ages, so far as it relates to the theology of the Church (ecclesiology).

(I should interpose here that Dr. Greenslade is prepared to preempt this discussion by arguing that the very facts of life, the continuing existence of spiritually fruitful separated churches, demonstrates that "the Church" is divided. Here, it seems to me, he fails to distinguish between facts and the interpretation of facts. The data of Christian disunity are the common data of all ecclesiologists. Of these data there are at least two rival interpretations. Dr. Greenslade's is one of these; it is obviously not incompatible with the facts, but it may prove to be

---

\* Burn Murdoch, in Church, Continuity and Unity, p.29, (quoted by A. Hastings, One and Apostolic, p.156).

incompatible with theology in the wider sense - it may leave us incapable of explaining Christianity without explaining it away. The other interpretation is that of pre-Reformation tradition and of the Eastern and Catholic Western churches; it is equally compatible with the facts, but it may prove to have consequences elsewhere in theology that are unacceptable).

In The Idea of the Church (1962) I urged that the concordant witness of tradition up to the Reformation (and thereafter in the Christian East and the Catholic West) is that the Church's unity is visible, and necessarily so, in the "association" of all its members in one "society" that is visibly a society and not an uncombined number of societies (I now prefer to speak of "communion" rather than "society"). That this was in fact the view held in Christian antiquity (not only by "the Catholic Church" but by bodies that were then, and are usually still, regarded as schismatic) is fully conceded by Dr. Greenslade; e.g.: The unity of the Church "was predicated of the visible Church, and the visible Church was thought of organically as one structure, one communion ... There was but one visible Church in one communion; bodies separated from that communion were outside the Church".

I do not think that these historical affirmations are seriously questioned. (Three facts are sometimes adduced in objection: temporary or partial separations in antiquity that may seem to have been "taken in their stride" by churchmen at the time or thereafter,

cf. Puller, Primitive Saints and the See of Rome; the great Western schism when the Western Christians' allegiance was divided between two or more soi-disant Popes; and the opposing claims of the Catholic and the Greco-Russian Orthodox Churches today, which are held (cf. Greenslade) to cancel each other out and destroy the theory on which both parties agree. I want just to point out here that precisely the continued vigour of the tradition (that the Church is necessarily visibly one) is demonstrated by its survival of these traumatic occurrences and paradoxical situations).

The Church, thus conceived as necessarily visibly one, has been described by me as a society. The word has overtones that make it in some ways unsatisfactory; it too rapidly takes us into questions of jurisdiction and official authority. I now prefer the term "communion", a good though not frequent New Testament term.

This word has, however, been used by Vatican II in a way which, taken in conjunction with other elements in the Acts of that Council, have led many to think (and among the many are many Catholics) that there has been a significant shift in the official Roman Catholic position about the visible unity of the Church.

Take the important statement in De Ecumenismo, n.3: The Catholic Church accepts with respect and affection those who belong to separated bodies and are instilled therein with Christ's faith. "For men who believe in Christ and have been properly baptised ere

brought into a certain, albeit imperfect, communion with the Catholic Church". I believe that this language, suggesting that there is such a thing as "imperfect" communion, is without official precedent in such a context. Taken together with the avoidance by the Council of a blunt statement that the Church founded by Christ is the Catholic Church, and with the accordance of ecclesial reality, and indeed the title "churches", to separated bodies that are, in fact, indicated as having a positive role in the divine purpose of applying redemption to all mankind, it has suggested to some that (a) the "separated bodies" being in imperfect communion with the Catholic Church, the latter is also in "imperfect communion"; (b) perfect communion will only exist in the world if and when our divisions have been overcome; (c) therefore, the Catholic Church is one among a number of bodies, none of which by itself can be simply identified with the Church, which is rather in existence in their sum-total (unless we prefer to say, as W. Temple is alleged to have done, that the "Catholic Church nowhere exists today"); (d) therefore, schism is always, or at least very commonly, within rather than from the Church.

Until Vatican II, it was assumed that you were either "in communion" or "out of communion"; it was not supposed that you could be "in imperfect communion" with the Church (you could be in imperfect communion with a particular diocese, however, if, for instance, you were not in direct communication with its bishop but

were in direct communion with some other diocese that was in direct communion with him).

What is the basis of the Vatican II change in linguistic usage? It is, I think, an appreciation of what Dr. Greenslade means when he speaks of the elements that go to make up ecclesiastical Christianity; elements that, following him, I will call the "holy things" (the Bible, the sacraments, a sacramental ministry etc.). To the extent that these things are present, he holds, to that extent the Church also is present; and so long as these things, or a notable number of them, are found in more than one Christian body, no Christian body can call itself, with accuracy and simpliciter, the Church.

One of these things is baptism, and it will be observed that it is in virtue of their baptism that Christians who are not Catholics are said by Vatican II to be in "a certain communion" with the Catholic Church. Other "holy things" (Optatus might have said "notes") are mentioned elsewhere in Vatican II's document on ecumenism, and it appears that, in the Council's view, the Eastern Churches are "still joined to us in a very close relationship" in virtue of the fact that they possess true sacraments, above all "the priesthood and the Eucharist" (n. 15). I trust, then, I am not misrepresenting the Council when I say that its language suggests that communion is constituted by possession of the holy things and increases towards perfect communion in the measure of the number and

importance of holy things "possessed".

Manifestly, the thought of Dr. Greenslade is very similar. For him, "churchness" is accorded to a religious group in the measure of its possession of holy things, and the fact that this churchness is present in more than one group prevents us, in his view, from affirming that only one such group is the Church.

The point that it seems to me important to make is that, while communion is based on common possessions, it is not constituted by common possessions - in saying this I am consciously departing from the linguistic usage of Vatican II. Let me make the point as follows.

For tradition, the supreme gift of God to his Church is Christ the redeeming and triumphant victim in the Eucharistic memorial and "holy communion". This great sacrament supposes, of course, the previous sacrament of baptism which is, at least in mediaeval thought, orientated towards the Eucharist (baptism makes you a member of the Church, but the unity of the Church is itself the "fruit" of the Eucharist). Two persons, therefore, or two groups, each of which possesses the Eucharist should, on Vatican II terms (if, that is to say, we adopt that Council's language), be in almost perfect communion with each other. But for antiquity the very symbol and outward sign of schism was altare contra altare, the celebration by two separated groups in the same place of the



sacrament of the Eucharist.\*1 How can we say that two such groups are in very close communion with each other and, at the same time, point to their separate sacramental celebrations as the very acme of what is meant by schism?

What then constitutes communion; what is it? I think it is an entitlement, without more ado, to participate in a continuing system of interpersonal relations. This entitlement presupposes a community of (spiritual) possessions; or rather, it is based upon a shared status of being possessed by God in Christ through the Holy Spirit. The Bible, sacred tradition, the sacraments are among these "possessions" - or among the means used by God to render possible our communion with him. It is the interpersonal relations that are at the heart of what we mean by communion.\*2 And at the heart of these relations is the Eucharist, the "one bread" whereby we who feed on it become "one body".

Christianity is a religion of persons and of relations between persons; at its high point it is a religion of persons constituted as persons by their relationship; for such are the Persons of the Holy Trinity. And in an analogous sense we may borrow from modern

---

\*1 Cyprian thought this could not even happen, since in his view there were no sacraments "outside" the Catholic Church; but on the crucial question of baptism, Rome and subsequent tradition disagreed with him.

\*2 The ancients spoke of homonoesa or concordia between bishops whom we should describe as "in communion" with each other.

psychology and philosophy and say that our own human personhood is in large measure constituted by our interpersonal relations.

Christian communion is, above all things, the relationship set up between each of us and the tri-personal God in consequence of objective redemption and subjective faith: "and our communion is with the Father and with the Son whom he has sent" (cf. 1 John 1). It is not just that we "share" Christ with his Father, but that, sharing Christ, we "have access through him to the Father" and are established in an interpersonal relationship with God that we call (adopted) sonship.

But Christian communion does not stop there. It is also a relationship between believing persons, a relationship that is interior in essence ("love of the brotherhood") but sacramentally and effectively manifested, above all in the shared Eucharist. "That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have communion with us; and our communion is with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ" (ibid.). We may even say that there is a certain mutual implication of the horizontal relationship between believers and the vertical relationship of each and all with the Father and with Christ in the Holy Spirit. These horizontal relationships are built up on common possession (each of us, through faith, possesses, or rather is possessed by, God; each of us is baptised; each of us is summoned to feed on the word of God in Scripture and tradition and in the Eucharist).

But these possessions, alas, do not by themselves ensure, but only make possible, interpersonal relations between us. And when we celebrate the Christian mysteries in opposition to one another, they even make more obvious the defect of interpersonal relations. I am "in communion" with the group with which I worship and with the members of which, through our joint worship, I relate; but I am rather obviously not "in communion" with those who worship in other groups not recognised by mine as part of the system of interpersonal relationships which is the communion. So far as I can see, I am no more per se "in communion" with those of another Church that has even valid sacraments than I am with the Salvation Army which dispenses with all the seven sacraments, although I am much closer to communion with the former.

The question about the Church may therefore be put in these terms: Is "communion", as I have interpreted this word, one of the "holy things" with which Christ endowed his Church? If it is, then in the first place it is something that is guaranteed till the end of history, not indeed by man's faithfulness but rather by the divine covenant: "Behold, I am with you always even to the end of the age". And secondly, this entails that there is today in the world one "communion" that can be called par' exochen "the Church".

Thirdly, if this is so, then the state of schism is the state of being outside this one communion.

Fourthly, schism, considered as something that intervenes

between Christian groups (not, then, as the personal "sin" of schism), can only be complete: a group either does or does not form part of the wider group constituted by "entitlement without more ado to share in a system of interpersonal relationships guaranteed by the Holy Spirit".

Fifthly, this state of schism precisely alienates the separated body and its members from that system of interpersonal relationships that is a divinely given and divinely guaranteed "holy thing".

Sixthly, schism can be healed for the individual by his "reconciliation" with the Church that embodies this system of interpersonal relationships. The same is true, in the end, for the separated group. But one who believes in "communion" as I have expounded it sees the Ecumenical Movement as a Spirit-inspired process towards this corporate reconciliation, a process calling for renewal on both sides of the gap.

Seventhly, if "communion" and therefore schism are such as I have argued them to be, it must be added that "communion" entails other features of ecclesiology. The communion itself requires an element of episcopé in the Church, as was seen by Ignatius (if the Letters are genuine) with reference to the local church, and by Cyprian, Optatus etc. with reference to the universal Church.

In the eighth place, merely to talk about "communion" and episcopé is not enough. If my argument is correct, Christ wills

that each and all of us should belong to a "communion" that already exists in the world. We need a criterion by which to identify this communion and distinguish it from others. I have not considered it to be my duty to offer such a criterion - or criteria.

Ninthly, it is a priori certain that the true "communion", wherever it exists, itself needs great internal reform and purification; not only because men are anyhow fallible and sinful, and the Church is made up of such men, but because the divisions among Christians have had a grievous effect upon every Christian group; we each need the help of all the others. Both the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox Churches could have been very different from what they are today if enstrangement and schism had not broken the relations between them.

Tenthly, I take it that even those among us who do not accept that communion, as expounded by me, is a divinely guaranteed "gift" or "holy thing" of the Church nevertheless agree that such communion is the goal at which the Ecumenical Movement aims. The future communion will need episcopé, and in my view we need to explore more fully than we were able to do in the Canterbury Statement what episcopé in its fullness comprises: the question of the papacy is up for discussion and is relevant to the issues of schism and communion.

I have not here dealt with the status of "holy things"

possessed outside the one communion, or with the qualities of the groups that possess them (except negatively). I renounce this issue with the greater confidence because it seems to me possible that the questions involved are not entirely avoided by denying my view; unless, indeed, it can be held that the Society of Friends and the more extreme American Christian groups are as much Church as is the Anglican Communion. Besides, I can refer to my book, The Idea of the Church.

I would just add finally two points. (a) Plainly, the New Testament evidence needs to be scrutinised and brought to bear in criticism on my ecclesiology. I think it possible that my ecclesiology may be the only one fully consistent with the totality of the evidence, although it may be difficult to illuminate it by a series of particular texts (it will be remembered that the Council of Niceea "saved" our faith by adopting a non-Scriptural word, while the Ariane would have held that theirs is the true exegesis of the New Testament).

(b) It is suggested that, just as the Church is imperfectly holy, catholic and apostolic, so it may be presumed to be imperfectly one. I agree. The system of interpersonal relationships that communion is, is capable of greater or less self-realisation - in that sense the "one communion" will always, on earth, be only imperfectly itself. But it can only grow in perfection by retaining the basic gift in at least its minimal

form. The Church, like the Christian, has to "become what she is"; but unless she already is what she is called to become, she can never become it. She is, in my view, already one; she is called to be more perfectly one. She is already one visible system of interpersonal relationships. She is called to develop those relationships from grace to grace to the measure of the fullness of the age of Christ.

Some books:

The Idea of the Church. B.C. Butler.  
Schism in the Early Church. S.L. Greenslade.  
The Church is Communion. Hamer, O.P.  
One and Apostolic. A. Hastings.  
Cf. also: After Nine Hundred Years. Y, Congar.

2nd May 1974.

B.C. Butler.