

This paper starts from the premiss that any christian understanding of authority must be founded on a proper understanding of the nature of the church.

### 1. Revelation

Christianity is a revealed religion. It is not a scheme of life proposed and exemplified by Jesus of Nazareth and devoutly adhered to by his followers, (though the example and teaching of Jesus is central to its message). Nor is it a religion built on speculation about the universe and man's place and destiny in the universe (though the reasoned study of the universe and of human nature is again proper to any practise of christianity). Christianity is founded on the belief that God, the source of all truth and authority, has revealed Himself to man, and that man, in his search for truth and stability, can and has responded to and understood this self revelation of his Creator.

The 'term' of God's revelation of Himself is always man. Under the Old Covenant he revealed Himself to man, yes, but in the events of human history. The prophets, for example, are enabled to say 'Thus saith the Lord' not ~~simply~~ because they received the prophetic message as it were by divine dictation, but because through their close adherence to God they were able to discern the hand and purpose of God in the event and interpret this to His people. In the New Testament, God again not simply as the man, Christ Jesus, but in the human nature which the Word fashioned for Himself from Mary. Thus Christ is not merely the oracle or mouthpiece of the Father; He is Himself the recipient of revelation in his manhood (though the source of revelation too, since He is consubstantial with the Father), and God is revealed not only in the teachings of Christ but equally and perhaps more fundamentally in the events of His life, passion and resurrection. The 'term' of God's revelation, even here, is still man.

The same holds true for the primitive church. Revealed truth is not simply delivered from its source in the God-man to the safe keeping of the appointed recorders who in turn will deliver it to posterity. Christ after all gave not simply a body of teaching, but Himself for man and to man; in the same way, man did not merely record an assembly of precepts for his guidance, but he received Christ, knowing both the benefits of his Paschal victory and the power of his risen life. Here again the medium in which God's revelation of himself takes place is the human community, indwelt both individually and collectively by Christ himself. It is this community which then articulates its understanding of Christ and his saving work, experiences the saving realities in the proclamation of the gospel, as in the sacraments of baptism and the eucharist, and introduces others to this same saving experience. The community then is of the utmost importance in God's purpose to reveal Himself to man; for as under the Old Covenant, as in the person of Jesus Christ, so in the church, it is <sup>in</sup> the raw fabric of human nature that the revelation of God takes place.

## 2. The unity of the churches in the New Testament

Since from the earliest times it was understood that christianity was 'not of man's invention', but a given revelation of the Truth Himself it is understandable that from the very beginning care should be taken to ensure that the local churches founded by the apostles exhibited a consistency in the gospel which they preached. Paul for example is anxious that ~~the~~ gospel that he had received (my gospel) should be at least consonant with that taught by Peter and the other apostles at Jerusalem (Galatians 1.14 ff). For St Paul again, not only is unity and harmony in the local church an essential to authentic christian life whose foundation is not man but Christ (I Cor.3); but for him (or at least in his tradition) there is for all the churches bgt 'one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all' (Ephesians 4.5.). There must too be an elemental agreement of questions of conduct; there is room for debate and reconciliation of differences on this (e.g. in the controversy on circumcision and

the admission of the Gentiles); but in making an ethical judgement (as in I Cor. 7.) Paul can say 'so ordain I in all the churches'. Though there is little evidence of conscious federation of local churches in the New Testament period (apart perhaps from Paul's own concern to make a collection for the saints at Jerusalem which may, as Professor Wiles suggests, have been to emphasise the mutual interdependence of the churches) there is nevertheless a consciousness of unity in faith and conduct which suggests a consciousness of identity from the very earliest period.

### 3. The 'mystery of the church' and the unity of the church in the NT

The term 'ekklesia' in the New Testament is normally used to describe the local church in any one place. On two occasions, however it has a wider sphere of reference; in Colossians<sup>1</sup> the church is expressly identified as the 'body of Christ', and in Ephesians<sup>5</sup> it is similarly designated as the 'bride of Christ'. This enables us to relate the local christian assembly to the images of the church scattered throughout the NT documents, and to understand that God's saving mystery in Christ, (portrayed in the images of body, bride, vine, temple, ark of Noah, New Jerusalem etc.) <sup>as that of the universal church</sup> is the living experience of each local congregation. It is fashionable in current Orthodox theology (and in some commentaries on the decree Lumen Gentium) to assert that the whole ecclesial mystery is present and perceptible as much in the local congregation (particularly when assembled for worship) as in the totality of the full assembly of the churches. So that the churches are one, not ~~merely~~ solely on account of the tangible expressions of unity on the horizontal level (sharing of ministries, intercommunion, common laws, customs, liturgies), but equally on account of the fact that each is identically and recognisably 'the church' i.e. because the whole mystery of the church is present in each.

This theology demands some qualification which a glance at the patristic church will provide.

#### 4. Unity in the patristic church

Similar understandings of ecclesial unity may be found in the writings of the Fathers. St Irenaeus, for example, in a much quoted passage, writes that 'The Church which fills the whole world and which guards securely the traditions of the apostles, offers to all but a single faith. All confess their faith in the same God, all believe in the same economy of salvation by the Incarnation of the Son of God, and in recognition of the identical gifts they have received from the one Spirit, endeavour to follow the same precepts. The same form of organisation is preserved among them and all are looking for the same Coming of the Lord and earning a salvation which is the same for all men' (Adv. Haer. III.2.1.) That is to say, wherever the church is encountered, it will be recognised to be the true church on account <sup>partly at least</sup> of the identity of the local churches in faith, conduct and in form of organisation. This last emphasis on 'form of organisation' seems to suggest that for a church to be 'church' ~~some kind of form~~ it must be structured as the other local churches i.e. one would expect to find, for example, in the patristic churches, the same baptismal discipline, <sup>the Scriptures preserved and read.</sup> a ministry duly authorised, a eucharistic assembly etc. This is the qualification we were looking for at the end of the last section. Nevertheless, we can still assert, the churches are one because they are identical, not solely because they have tangible expression of federation.

There is more. The churches are identical now because they were identical at their origin. Irenaeus states that they 'guard securely the teaching of the Apostles'; the true church is that which has apostolic pedigree, which is one way of distinguishing it from the Gnostic conventicle. So too for St Cyprian, the Church is one because it was founded on one man (St Peter) which not only symbolises but effects its unity. Unity that is to say, is at source, and it is a quality which spreads out into the world like the rays of the sun; its bishops are one because each possesses the episcopal authority <sup>given to Peter & his apostles</sup> in totality. And it is on account of this unity at source that the bishops now enjoy and express the collegiality and adhere to one another in mutual concord.

## 5. Unity at source in the continuing church

Two features of ecclesial life would seem to contribute to this sense of identity at origin. The first is the churches' care of and appeal to the Scriptures. These are read daily in ~~the~~ their assemblies, proclaimed and expounded in the preaching of the word and studied and meditated upon by the individual christian. There is a 'primordial' quality about the Scriptures; through their study and reading, and through the church's reliance on them an recognition of their authoritative status, christians are constantly brought close to the primitive church's experience of redeemed life. On the other hand, the reading and exposition of the scriptures in the christian assembly (and outside it) ensures a certain 'sameness' of christian understanding and experience in different periods of the church's life. For it is the same Lord and the same Spirit who speaks through the pages of Scripture.

The other feature which preserves this sense of identity at origin and with the past is the eucharist. At the eucharist, through the memorial made of the Paschal victory of Christ, christians are not only aware of the presence of Christ but of the presence of the redeeming Christ, since the entire Paschal event is not simply called to mind but made effectually and effectively present. In every age therefore the church is weekly and sometimes daily conscious of the historical event of the passion and resurrection of Christ which is as much a present reality as it is rooted in time. It is the event which gave birth to ~~the~~ and is made manifest in the mystery of the church; it is the Event common to the whole church and made effectively present in each local church. It unites the local churches both with one another and with their common origins; hence it is rightly called the sacrament of the Church's and the churches' unity.

5. Our present division in the light of this theology

For the reconciliation of our two communions, it would seem that the following requirements have to be fulfilled.

- (a) We must recognisably confess the same faith
- (b) We must recognisably profess the same basic standards of christian conduct
- (c) We must be seen to preserve the same form of church order in the local church

Thus each local church of our respective communions may be recognized to be truly 'ecclesial'.

(d) We must recognisably have the same 'pedigree', i.e. be seen to stand in succession to the churches founded by the apostles. In this the apostolic ministry would seem to be as basic an essential as our common confession of the apostolic faith. <sup>So too, we must read and expound the same Scriptures; we must recognise & celebrate the same eucharist.</sup> The faith after all is given and is not of man's invention; and this adherence to the revelation of God in Christ must be a visible feature of both communions.

(e) Though both of our churches have organisational structures higher than the local church (diocesan, provincial and in the Roman Church, papal) these signs of unity would seem to follow after the essentials of unity we have outlined above.

(f) The authority to which we both owe allegiance is God Himself as revealed in Christ. Our obedience to this authority is witnessed to by the identities we have sought to draw out in this paper; our disobedience and unfaithfulness is revealed in the differences in faith, conduct and order which have yet to be resolved.

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