

CONCLUSION

OUR consideration of some of the issues connected with Church and Ministry has been undertaken from the point of view of the Church of Scotland. This part of the universal Christian Church, though small and provincial, has in the course of the centuries had a vivid and searching experience of many of the problems with which the world Church of to-day is faced. After sharing in the common ecclesiastical life of Europe from the beginning of the fifth century, it was reformed in 1560 under Geneva influence, and its doctrine, worship and government still bear witness to this decisive orientation.

We call ourselves Presbyterians. When, however, we turn to other bodies whose tradition is similar, we are conscious of differences, and are made aware that, though the Church of Scotland holds a position of high honour within this alliance, it can scarcely be said to set the standard theologically, liturgically or ecclesiastically. Environment has encouraged the emergence of variations, for Holland, France, Hungary, Switzerland, Germany, the Czechs, the Waldensians have had distinctive histories, political, social, economic, cultural and spiritual, and even the Presbyterians of Ireland, Wales and England and of the United States are readily distinguishable from those of Scotland. Our Church, however, remains an interesting member of the Reformed or Presbyterian family, and may be studied with profit not only for the tradition which it shares so widely, but also for the special features for which its peculiar experience has been responsible. Since the Reformation the character and circumstances of the people, the predilections of leaders and the accidents of history have been at work, slowly elaborating and maturing the attitude which now prevails.

If the result is not so narrow and idiosyncratic as might have been expected, this is largely owing to the fact that the initial position of Reformed Scotland was that of Calvin, which is quite remarkably central; and while opinion and practice have been constantly swinging to right and to left, the ropes have held, and the excursions in both directions, while involving a survey of wide fields, have ended very much where they began, though

the swinger is now both wiser and better informed. The ecclesiastical history of Scotland shows a succession of bitter conflicts, between Episcopacy and Presbyterianism, between authority and conscience, between State and Church; but the intensity of feeling was in part due to the circumstance that the Geneva system, though it developed its own marked scholasticisms, was essentially so elastic and comprehensive that very wide differences were possible between loyal adherents of Calvin. The Aberdeen Doctors believed themselves as true to him, as did the Covenanters; both the Establishment and the Secessions found warrant in his works; the Moderate as well as the Evangelical could claim his support.

The range has certainly been considerable. On the right the tendency was to the institutional, the authoritative, the traditional, the communal, and so looked out towards Anglicanism and the so-called Catholic quarters. On the left it showed interest in the spiritual, in liberty, in the demands of the present, in the individual, and so came in sight of the Independents. The outcome of the struggles has been a union in which we find working together within the Church of Scotland the descendants of all the parties of the old controversies. Differences remain. There is a small but distinguished High Church group; there are many whose ideals and some whose failings clearly link them with eighteenth-century Moderatism; there is a strong section which is zealously Evangelical, democratic and Puritan; there are a few Barthians; and there are some so far to the left that they appear to accept principles very like those of Congregationalists, Baptists and Brethren. Nevertheless, it may be said that our extremists actually go but a modest way: the central position between Catholicism and Independency remains sufficiently obvious; but the resulting unity, while it has naturally little about it of uniformity, is not simply that of a bunch of flowers or a ragman's bag, the comprehensiveness being rather that of a whole composed of various ingredients: there is a recognisable flavour and the nutritive value is demonstrable. It is noticeable that criticisms of Protestantism in *Catholicity* or other publications of like tendency seldom seem to ring true of the Church of Scotland and apply rather perhaps to sections of the English Free Churches, while criticisms of institutionalism, formalism, state relationship,

that come from an opposite direction, also appear to miss the mark when directed against us.

One cannot but reflect upon the difficulty which we all experience in trying to put ourselves in the place of others and see things from their standpoint. Champions seem to miss one another in the excitement of the tournament of terms and arguments, and, though there is plenty of dust and heat, spears seem to remain intact and shields undamaged. The outside critic's sense of perspective and proportion is bound to be peculiarly defective. We have to realise that unsatisfactory results are sure to follow when other people are treated as anatomical specimens rather than as living souls, and when systems are studied in official documents and published pronouncements instead of as going concerns. We are all in danger of unconsciously caricaturing our opponents in discussion, and so seldom can enter into such real communion with them as to appreciate what they really are after and what they stand for, and to bring to bear upon the investigation the justice and the charity without which none is fit to judge.

Modern conferences of representatives of the various Churches have indeed a different tone from that of the controversy of the sixteenth or seventeenth century or even later. There are now so many conferences of all sorts in our day that many have come to regard all such gatherings somewhat cynically.

*"Here are the bickerings of the inconsequential,
The chatterings of the ridiculous, the iterations
Of the meaningless."*¹

But good must come from meetings which take place in faith and love. Possibly ecclesiastical world conferences are still too academic: they are most assuredly too clerical; but they are unquestionably more realistic than Church councils sometimes were. Robert Baillie complained about "velitations on quiddities" served up by Independent opponents, aimed, he alleged, at advantage and victory rather than truth. The university system for centuries put a premium on mere logic. There was also an almost invariable assumption that failure to be convinced must have its origin somehow in malice, if not in immorality. Perhaps present-day disputations are too polite and flattering to be always sincere:

over-condescension of manner may accompany a thoroughly intransigent dogmatism. There is, however, more genuine toleration, and we do not shock or scare one another so easily, while those who, like the barber in Romola, hesitate to fetter their impartiality by entertaining an opinion, will not trouble themselves with these earnest conversations.

As far as Scotland is concerned, approaches to other bodies have been facilitated by actual contacts with their representatives, by the gradual breaking down of cultural provincialism, by the abandonment of theories of "divine right," and the fundamentalist attitude to the Bible. While the characteristic Scottish independence encouraged individuality, it did not confuse this with eccentricity, and the vagaries of sectarianism were always limited by common sense; but we have been in some danger from sentimental and distrustful hoarding of left-offs and broken-downs in doctrine and worship, and seem only slowly to be developing a realistic attitude in this connection. Both in the externals of religious services and in theology there has been a change for the better. Austerity for austerity's sake has lost its appeal, partly through the rediscovery of the sixteenth century behind the seventeenth and a revived interest in the many other centuries beyond both, while self-centred and morbid absorption with one's own soul and concern with the other world and its rewards and punishments have lost prominence and Covenanting Scotland may be said to have disappeared quite as completely as Elizabethan England. F. D. Maurice² hinted that Scottish thought in his day was "a compound to which, if John Knox has contributed one part, Thomas Hobbes has contributed three." He did not know so much about Scotland as the frequency of his references to it would lead one to expect; but it would be interesting to guess how he would have described the existing position, for the last century has witnessed peculiarly eventful developments in line with scientific and philosophical and cultural world advance. This co-relates with the change from the "black houses" which Boswell and other travellers have described and which here and there survived till the First World War, men and animals under the same thatched roof, the fireplace in the middle of the floor, the peat-smoke (or some of it) escaping through a hole above, windows as small as ingenuity

could contrive and not made to open: breeding-places for phthisis. It may be said that more and more the needs of the present and the future are being courageously recognised. At the same time, the heritage from the past continues to be proudly and reverently cherished, and there is no risk that the distinctiveness of the Scottish message will vanish in any colourless uniformity.

Our survey has indicated some of the more characteristic features of Scots ecclesiastical experience with particular reference to their bearing upon the difficulties and opportunities of organised Christianity in the contemporary world. The most patent emphasis is that which has been laid upon the Word, God as He has revealed Himself to man. In worship we seek this Will of God in Christ, and, in the atmosphere of the Church with its age-long experience, with its praise and prayer and fellowship, and especially with the aid of the Bible, this Word comes to us effectively, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The attitude to Scripture might be stated in the words of the Lambeth Conference of 1930: "We affirm the supreme and unshaken authority of the Holy Scriptures as presenting the truth concerning God and the spiritual life in its historical setting and in its progressive revelation." Calvin³ reflected that the human mind is a "perpetual forge of idols," and some of his followers chose a petrified Bible for their particular idol; but the modern Church of Scotland does not suffer from such scholasticism, and realises that neither Bible nor Church nor Inner Light may be regarded as ultimate authority, but that each has its function in relation to the reception and the transmission and the application of the Word. The Spirit in the Church interprets the Word and makes it to those who are of God effectual for salvation.

The place assigned to Faith must be noted. The professing Christian in the Church has a duty of intelligent apprehension set before him, and the sermon and other means of instruction have a position of centrality in connection with worship; but the intellectual demand does not imply rationalism, and the actual aim seems to be well expressed by Hugh Binning when he writes: "True religion consists not only in the knowledge of God, but especially in conformity to Him and communion with Him."⁴

The Sacraments are the Word made visible. Hilaire Belloc⁵

described the Reformation as a "reaction against the conception of a sacrificing priesthood, and of an order sacramentally set apart for the exercise of spiritual power among Christian men." No doubt the Reformers would have acquiesced; but some have carried their opposition further than others. The Church of Scotland reverently observes Baptism and the Lord's Supper, believing in the real objective presence and activity of Christ in the celebration of these sacraments, regarding them, not, indeed, as necessary for salvation, but as signs and seals of the benefits which God has graciously bestowed upon us through the Word, and to which His people are responding in faith. Infant Baptism is associated with the family and community covenant idea rather than with the personal faith of the participant, and in the Lord's Supper among the several religious conceptions involved that of fellowship is specially prominent. The Church of Scotland thus sets aside the practice of believers' baptism and also any purely subjective attitude in the observance of Communion; but on the other hand repudiates a sacerdotal view that would seem to intrude the Church as a mediating institution between the soul and man, replacing, as it might be thought, Christ Himself. The Church is the people of God, Christ is its Head, and the Holy Spirit is its life.

The present day is giving the Laity more scope and more responsibility in connection with organised religion. The Reformed Church of Scotland was from the beginning conscious of the value of lay support, and through its Eldership endeavoured to secure this. It has never seen cause to alter the arrangement, and though the precise duties of the Elder have changed with the times, his general responsibility remains what it has always been, to assist the minister in the supervision of the spiritual life of the parish. Principal R. H. Story pointed out that in this provision "the Reformers reverted to the Apostolic conception of the Church as the Christian community in the completeness of its whole membership."⁶

The Church of Scotland is to-day not merely an advocate of Unity but an example of it. The Unions of 1900 and 1929 have been within the domestic circle, but the cause of ecclesiastical unity in general has been definitely promoted by this Scottish achievement. On the other hand, there is not in Scotland the

same passion for organic unity as is to be expected of a more emphatically institutional body, such as the Church of England, especially viewed from the Anglo-Catholic standpoint. We are told of Robert Browning that "the sense of the absolute sanctity of human difference was the deepest of all his senses,"⁷ and the Church of Scotland would appreciate this interest. As a national Church, it incorporates after generations of controversy all classes and all types. It is given to hospitality, and far from regarding difference of opinion or practice or method as sin, or thinking of uniformity as a goal as it had done in the days of the Solemn League and Covenant, it encourages variety, welcomes what will enrich it, aims at comprehensiveness. It seeks to meet the multifarious needs of a general population, desiring not the epidemic segregation and narrow specialism to which the sects incline, but a healthy variety within unity. It is not profoundly impressed by the Catholic concern for such a visible external organisation as the Catholic theory of succession would necessitate. Of sectarianism and the sectarian spirit the world has had more than enough. The separatist, as Principal James Denney⁸ observed, was apt to lose the historical sense, and this meant an undervaluing of the Church. Calvin wisely urged that not without ample cause should one break formal unity. Some balance is clearly to be sought between the over-institutionalist and the over-individualist: in isolation each is a dangerous agent; but one might admit the "juredivinoship" of the combination, and it was such a wholeness that Calvin himself steadily advocated.

In Scotland we have experienced the difficulties associated with both the extensive religious body with its professedly Christian but largely nominal membership, and the intensive group with its limited outlook and strained nerves: the advantages both of a widely distributed, if vague, loyalty, and of a highly cultivated, if somewhat self-centred, spiritual élite. A singularly intimate picture of the sect type is to be found in one of Samuel Rutherford's sermons:⁹ "A cause is not good because followed by many. . . . They go to Hell in thousands . . . Christ's are but a little flock; ah, the way to heaven is overgrown with grass, there the traces of few feet are to be seen in the Way; only you may see the print of our glorious fore-runner Christ's foot, and of the prophets, apostles, martyrs, and the handful that

follow the Lamb. Follow ye on, and miss not your lodging." But it is different with the grandchildren of the saints. They take themselves less seriously, breathe unconsciously, and never think of counting their heart-beats. The stage may be reached to which F. D. Maurice refers when "the hereditary habit has begun to prevail, the religion becomes a matter of course, its power is exhausted."¹⁰ The power may be exhausted, and the throwing on of vestments may become, not a sign of, but a substitute for, the presence of the Holy Spirit; but society has always consisted of the few and the many, and both types are God-created, and though the history books concentrate upon heroes and revolutions and battles, we know that God was also with the multitudes who had no history, and his love has in fact soaked into the common life of assumption and habit and created that Christendom, which in spite of all the faults that Kierkegaard can find in it, is something utterly other than Heathendom. R. W. Dale¹¹ has pronounced: "The members of a Christian Church should be Christians." But what is a Christian? What do we really mean by the Holy Church?

The Church of Scotland believes and declares itself to be part of the Catholic Church, and glories in continuity as it looks back through its local history and through the centuries that link us to the first disciples of Jesus. Its sacraments and its ordination it holds to be those of the Catholic Church, which is thought of as the whole body of professing Christians, of every race, condition and temperament. Those who resile from Romish exclusiveness have sometimes stressed the common faith, and John Menzeis¹² was justified in proclaiming: "The title of Catholic, without the true Catholic faith, is but *magni nominis umbra*"; but the old conception of Truth as a deposit which could be grasped completely and handed on intact, a complicated magical formula, has disappeared, and our generation shows no facility in the production of creeds, catechisms, or satisfying short statements of the faith. Comprehensiveness of doctrine must be admitted as an aspect of Catholicity, comprehensiveness also in answering the needs of different types as represented, for example, by the diverse communions whose delegates processed through the Nieuwe Kerk of Amsterdam on August 22, 1948. The Scots view was long ago expressed by John Brown of Wamphray: "Of this

Catholic Church all the Churches are members in particular; and though in their particular meetings they have a nearer communion with those who are parts of the given meeting, yet they have a potential and remoter communion with all the members of the visible Church."¹³ It was felt that the test of Catholicity was recognition of the Headship of Christ. "Looking unto Jesus": it is thus also that we find ourselves in communion with so great a cloud of witnesses and gather strength to run our race with patience.

Said Ebenezer Erskine: "A Gospel Ministry is of divine institution. . . . The office of the Ministry is perpetually useful and necessary. . . . Ordinances are perpetually necessary in the Church, and therefore there must be a Ministry to dispense them."¹⁴ Said James Durham: "Directions for a believer's walk given by Christ's ministers from the Word are his own, are accounted by him as if he did immediately speak them himself."¹⁵ The Ministry is that of the Word of God, and the minister's authority is plain. In Scotland there was for centuries no suspicion of doubt about this, no departure from such high doctrine. To-day in this province as in all others much has changed. The Sacraments are widely despised as mere childish ceremonies, and similarly the preaching is in some quarters disdained as no more than expression of personal opinions, at the best some bright thoughts enforced by personality.

Along with the conviction as to the givenness of the Ministry we have in Scotland peculiar emphasis on the importance of the people's share in the election of their minister. *The Second Book of Discipline* was emphatic that no one must be intruded into a sacred office without the consent of the congregation concerned. In the eighteenth century and later this claim of the laity had to fight the ancient practice of patronage. The Secessions and the Disruption come into this story. In the end the people won, and patronage has long been abolished in Scotland.

The idea of historic succession excites little interest, though there is a general assumption with regard to the continuity of the Church as the people of God and of the Ministry within it. Historical circumstances are believed to have produced diocesan episcopacy, and historical circumstances later rendered the arrangement distasteful to many religious communities. No

warrant could be found in any case for the supposition that exclusively by this channel grace was intended normally to filter through to mankind. Apostolical succession as understood by Anglo-Catholics seems to be a legal fiction in the interest of authority and security; but in the course of history it was the direct source of many grievous abuses from which the Church could only be delivered by drastic reformation. Scotland appears satisfied that not just a few bishops in the land, but the parish minister with whom every Christian individual has immediate personal relations possesses whatever grace and ambassadorial power Christ has been pleased to convey to anyone, whether priest or prophet, by His Spirit.

Apostolicity, however, means more for the modern Church than loyalty to the past: it means faithfulness to the sending out which was the origin of the term. The missionary spirit was never stronger than in our day, and Scotland has a good record in this department of Church interest and activity. The title page of the first printed edition of the *Scots Confession* bore this text from the Geneva Version: "And this glad tidings of the kingdom shall be preached throughout the whole world for a witness to all nations, and then shall the end come." The world is a very different place from even that which Renaissance enquiry discovered, but the World for Christ is to-day for the Christian Church, and not least for Scotland's part of it, a pressing problem and a constant challenge: an imperative ideal.

The place given to the question of ministerial parity may to some seem to indicate over-concern with petty academic distinctions, and church-going people have not generally found much appeal in Church government for its own sake. As a rule it was only when there was actual interference with their personal religious practices that they roused themselves in protest. Thomas Chalmers¹⁶ was a practical enthusiast rather than a scholar or thinker, and he felt that too much energy was spent in discussing governmental difference, "a dimly conjectural region." His complaint was not groundless, for the numerous and voluminous treatises produced were to a considerable extent based on false premises, the discussion on every hand was upheld by arguments which, since we have rejected the common assumptions of all concerned, must appear to us irrelevant, the

disputes were conducted with little thought of mutual enlightenment, to conquer being imagined to be the same thing as to convince, and the whole debate was vitiated by wishful thinking. The controversy may also have appeared to Dr. Chalmers to have been concerned merely with administrative convenience and institutional efficiency. The Presbyterian system in Scotland, under which Church government is by graded courts of ministers and elders, and only one ministry, that of the Word and Sacraments, is recognised, might be defended or assailed with respect to the extent to which it has approved itself in practical Church life. This alone, however, would not give it a claim to the attention which it has actually received and if nothing more were involved one would be justified in feeling that much of the zeal and learning displayed might have been more usefully employed if applied in other directions. Obviously more must have been at stake when the Christian population of Britain settled down in post-Reformation times as Episcopalians, Presbyterians and Independents, and when it has remained so divided ever since.

Evidence such as we have in this volume endeavoured to present must have contributed to show that in these differences about Church government there is involved a fundamental tension, the tension of authority and liberty, institutional and spiritual, communal and individualistic, Catholic and Evangelical. Scottish Presbyterianism has decided affinities with both trends, and with something of the national caution shrinks alike from formalism and from fanaticism. But the tension as such is constitutive of the reality to which we belong. This does not mean a condition of stalemate or standstill, for the tension as our national history has illustrated, is a very active one. We may trust that, by the grace of God, and according to the faith of the participants, it will issue in constructiveness and true progress that the world may believe.