

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_churchman\\_os.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php)

[*Cheltenham Conference Address.*]

## The Possibilities of Re-Union.<sup>1</sup>

### II

BY THE REV. A. E. GARVIE, M.A., D.D.

I DO not wish to traverse the same ground as you, Mr. Chairman, have done, but in speaking I desire to offer some considerations of wider range as bearing on the possibilities of reunion. Nearly forty years ago, when quite a youth, I heard Dr. Stoughton, a noted Church historian, and, I understand, a personal friend of Dean Stanley, declare that unity was by way of the Cross, and after these forty years I want to echo his saying : Unity is by way of the Cross. And that in two senses. In the first place, in the measure in which Christians realize their common experience of redemption through Christ Jesus the Lord, in that measure will they be drawn nearer to one another. It is the common Christian experience that must be the basis of any reunion of the Christian church, and the more intense and real and dominant that Christian experience is in all our thinking and willing, the nearer will that reunion be for us. And so the first condition of the possibility of reunion is a more vital and vigorous Christian experience in all the ministers and members of the church of Jesus Christ. As we are drawn nearer to Christ we are drawn nearer to one another.

It seems to me, further, that reunion is by way of the Cross in this other sense also, that we must be prepared to crucify a good many things to which we attach a good deal of importance now if we are to have reunion. We must take up the Cross and follow Jesus Christ, and be prepared to surrender many things that may be of value to us now, but are not essential for us. To make a surrender of anything essential is sin. We dare not surrender a conviction or a principle that is rooted in our personal relation to our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, but, on the other hand, it is sin to use as a reason against reunion anything that is not rooted in our relation to our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. What unites us must be in Him ; nothing has a right to divide us that is not in Him also ; and therefore we are to be prepared to crucify our preferences and prejudices, our traditions and conventions, our memories and

<sup>1</sup> Specially reported for THE CHURCHMAN.

associations; and, after all, if we closely scrutinize our denominational loyalty, we must admit that there is a good deal in it which, quite legitimate in itself, becomes illegitimate as soon as it is made a reason against fulfilling the duty of drawing nearer to our fellow-Christians. It is natural that we should prefer the mode of worship in which we have been brought up, natural that we should cling to memories and associations of the place of worship where we usually attend, natural that we should prize as our Christian brethren more highly those with whom we are thrown into close contact because of common service in one branch of the Church of Jesus Christ. But all these things, legitimate as they are in their own place, become illegitimate if they are used as an excuse for indifference to the wider obligation of the union of all the Christian churches. It may be that an ardent denominationalism is one of the things that will need to be crucified if we are to get nearer Christ and the fulfilment of His desire.

A second condition of the possibility of reunion, I think, is that our conscience should become more sensitive than it has ever yet been to the scandal and injury of our divisions as regards the witness and work of the Christian church in the world. I meet earnest brethren, Christian brethren, who are doing their own work faithfully and efficiently, and they say, "What is the use of all this talk about reunion? Let us just go on doing our work, even if we do it separately." But these brethren need to have their consciences quickened and their eyes opened. The Christian church is not doing its mission work in the world, not delivering its message as effectively to men as that message ought to be delivered, so long as it is sundered by unnecessary divisions. We realize, those of us who in any measure recognize the immeasurable obligations that are laid upon the Christian church, that the Christian church is not doing half the work it ought to do because it has not got the strength to put into that work—a strength that would come to it very much more fully if it were much more united than it is.

What has greatly helped the movement towards reunion of recent years is that Conference of ever blessed memory—the Edinburgh Missionary Conference. I have met only one man who came back from that Conference rather despondent; I will not mention his name, but his reason for despondency was that the High Churchmen had had too predominant a place in the Conference. Happily, few

people were affected in that way. Almost everybody I met felt that that Conference was probably more important—certainly as we look back upon it much more important—than some of the Councils that theological students have to bother themselves about, often feeling as they do that it is labour in vain. The foreign missionary enterprise is calling for union, and if we could get the Christian church enthusiastic about the foreign missionary enterprise it would be more enthusiastic about the reunion of Christendom.

Then, again, there is social reform. Some of us find it possible to co-operate with Anglicans, Roman Catholics, and Jews in regard to social reform. One of my most prized fellow-workers in the cause of social reform is a Jewish rabbi, and he and I have come to respect one another because we have that common interest. Then—what we ought to have known before, but the war by concentrating our manhood where we could make some adequate inquiry regarding religious conditions has brought it home to us, so that what we ought to have known we discovered with a painful surprise—this country of ours is not as Christian as we thought it was. We are aware and are proud of the brave and strong qualities of our people, but we recognize also that vital godliness, a personal experience of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, is comparatively uncommon, and the Christian churches have to ask themselves how it is that so great multitudes of the manhood of the nation have not the sign manual of the Lord Jesus Christ on the thought and the life. We want to make this country through and through Christian, and if we realize the measure in which it is not Christian we shall be brought into that condition of desire for the reunion of Christendom which will make attainable what seem to be impossibilities, and lead us to venture on what may well appear beyond human strength and courage to accomplish.

Then I turn to a consideration which may seem to some of you altogether out of place. A great many people, even in the Christian ministry, have a very low estimate of scholars. To be a professor is to be—as regards all practical work—an inefficient; to be a principal—well, that is to be beyond all hope! I have been told again and again, with some degree of surprise, that I could be understood when I preached! It is taken for granted that the principal of a college could never be understood. But I have known persons of less exalted stations who could not be understood when they

preached. I think the discussions have brought home to us the fact that scholarship is not an enemy but an ally of this movement for Christian reunion. The results of scholarship, instead of making reunion more difficult, are likely to make it easier. Let us recognize that those who, by their past history, by all their associations and traditions, still cling to views of the Christian ministry and Episcopacy that may seem to be a barrier to reunion are men of honest mind. If scholarship is distinctly moving in the direction in which according to the indications given at our Conference it is moving, then we may hope that scholarship will do a great deal to remove one of the chief obstacles to Christian reunion.

There is one thing that scholarship as applied to history will do for us ; it will show us the relativity of all things historical. There is nothing in history that has any absolute value. We recognize that in history there is a divine providence, but it is a divine providence that is not omnipotently compelling human activity ; it is a divine providence that allows itself to be confined and limited and thwarted and delayed by human purpose and human endeavour and human neglect. Therefore when we look on any historical development of the past we may look for the kernel of divine providence, but we will always find a good deal of the husk of human failure and error connected even with the work of divine providence in human history. What has emerged in history may again be submerged in history. We have no right to affirm that because a thing is historical therefore it is right and obligatory. It is not enough to say that the Episcopate is historical to justify the Episcopate. Because it is historical and has emerged in history, it is possible that it may be submerged in history. What has come into existence may go out of existence in the historical realm. If we recognize that in spite of all the human operations in history there has been a divine presence and direction, then we also learn that while there is a relativity of all things historical there may be universal and permanent values that come to man from God along the channels of history. The divine revelation and the human redemption have emerged in history, but not one of us believes that they are going to be submerged in history. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever. The eternal may express itself through the temporal, and what we have to do, with our scholarship joined to moral and spiritual insight, is to detach the temporal from the eternal

and let the temporal go, but keep fast hold of the eternal that has come to us through the temporal.

Apply that principle to the Episcopacy. You cannot claim for the Episcopacy an absolute validity, but you may claim for it a relative value, and I think that most of you brethren are not inclined to go any further than that. I suppose you are all prepared to recognize that a condition of affairs might arise in human history in which another form of government of the Christian church might commend itself to the common Christian reason and conscience which might supersede Episcopacy, and the Christian church might be refusing to follow the divine leading if it clung to Episcopacy. The Old Testament is full of lessons for us in that respect. Some of the opponents of Jeremiah brought up against him certain teachings of Isaiah about the inviolability of Jerusalem. Now the teachings of Isaiah were valid for the time of Isaiah, and the time of Jeremiah needed another message. And so we have to recognize that there are eternal values, but those eternal values come to us in temporal forms, and that for those temporal forms we must not make the same claims as we make for the eternal values.

As a signatory to the document which has been again and again referred to at this Conference, I need not tell you that I believe that under the present historical conditions, as far as I know and understand them, the Episcopate will have a place in any reunion of Christendom, but only if it is relieved of those accretions that belong not to the divine providence in the Church, but to human imperfection. And if we could get the institution detached altogether from theories of the institution that have been attached to it, I am quite sure a great deal of the difficulty that non-Episcopal communions feel about accepting Episcopacy would be removed. Not only so, but we should be able so to reform Episcopacy as to adapt it more effectively to do the work in the Christian church that Episcopacy is called to do. The bishop is to be the "father in God." Well, now, the bishop's family, under the conditions of modern episcopacy, is far too big a family for any finite bishop to compass; it would require an infinite bishop to deal with all the individuals with whom he has to deal, and to deal with all the interests with which he is expected to deal; and so we must realize that if we detach from the institution a theory which, so to speak, makes sacrosanct the institution as it exists we make ourselves free to modify that

institution to make it more effective than it has ever yet been for the very purposes for which we believe, under existing conditions, it to be a desirable form of church government.

It is only my desire for Christian reunion that has led me to turn aside from my particular interests and to follow the path which leads up to these historical questions. What has particularly attracted me has been Christian theology in the distinctive sense of the term, not so much the polity or ritual of the church as the creed of the church. Now, it seems to me, there is a movement as regards Christian theology which also indicates a condition favourable to reunion. Our theology is getting simpler. We are throwing over a great deal of useless cargo, and I think we will go all the faster towards our haven if we throw over some of that cargo. I was reading a short time ago a most interesting small book published by a French naval chaplain in which he commends French Protestantism to the French nation, and there he indicates this movement to which I wish to turn your attention. He states that we may say that there have been in the past three main types of Christian theology, the dogmatic, the ecclesiastical, and the biblical. The dogmatic is represented by the Orthodox Greek church, the church so to speak, which formulated belief into dogmas, which had to be accepted by all the ministers of the church. Then we have the ecclesiastical or Roman Catholic type; in this case there is not so much the formulation of dogma as a continuous tutelage of people and ministry by ecclesiastical authority. Think of the difference between these two great doctrines, the doctrine of the incarnation and the doctrine of the atonement. There is a dogma of the incarnation, but there is not a dogma of the atonement. The doctrine of the atonement has never been dogmatically formulated in the same way as the doctrine of the incarnation has been. The Roman Catholic church does not so much formulate doctrine in dogma because it wants to keep its hand always, so to speak, at the helm, to be always telling the reason and conscience of clergy and laity alike what the church teaches as true. There is not the same degree of reliance on formulated doctrine in the shape of dogma. At the Reformation, while the dogma of the undivided church was taken up, and a great deal in the teaching of the Roman Catholic church was still maintained, the cry of the reformers was "Back to the Bible," but we were reminded by Dr. Harden in his paper at this Con-

ference that it was the Protestant scholasticism which was responsible for the doctrine of the Holy Scripture that the great reformers themselves never held. There were theories of inspiration formulated by the smaller men of the second generation that the big men of the first generation of Protestantism would never have thought of formulating. I am glad to think that the Quadrilateral says that the Bible contains all that is necessary. There is a great difference between saying that the Bible *is* the Word of God, and that the Bible *contains* the Word of God. The Bible is a casket, a precious casket, but what we want is the jewel in the casket, although in many parts the casket itself is absolutely transparent so that the richness of the jewel shines through.

So there is a movement in Christian theology towards discovering the Gospel in the Bible, not depreciating the Bible, but, so to speak, appreciating more highly the Gospel in the Bible. We have to recognize surely the relative values. I may offend some here, but I have never been able to nourish my soul on the genealogical lists in Chronicles in the way that I have been able to nourish my soul on John xiv. and xvii. There is something like relativity even in the Bible. It is a divine gift, but it comes to us through human hands, and we have more and more to concentrate upon the Gospel in the Bible. We are following Christ there. He rebuked the bibliolaters of His own time by saying, "Ye search the Scriptures because ye think that in them ye have eternal life, and these are they which bear witness of Me; and ye will not come to Me that ye might have life." It is Christ and the revelation of God in the redemption of man in Christ that is the living heart of the Bible, and the Bible lives in relation to that, its living heart. That does not depreciate a bit the rest of the Bible, only it teaches us to observe some proportion in the way in which we insist on this or that which may be contained in the Bible. I think we want that quite frankly recognized. I make no objection to any brother holding as rigid a theory of inspiration as he pleases. Let him follow the Spirit that inspired the Scriptures in the view of the inspiration of the Scriptures he has got; do not let him impose his theory of inspiration upon me if that same Spirit has led me to modify that view. I think the best thing for reunion is absolute honesty on all sides. I stand here as one who has welcomed and heartily welcomed modern biblical scholarship, and at the same time I can testify to this, that the Bible has more

moral value, more spiritual significance, is more charged with the energy of the Spirit of God for me to-day than it ever was before.

Some people think that the object of theology is to make faith difficult. Well, there are theologians who do make faith difficult. There are theological books that make theology a mystery to be understood not even by the writers of the theological books themselves. I admit that there are theological questions that only theologians can discuss. I try to be as humble as I can—it takes all the grace I have got to be humble—when a man of science who gives odd moments amid other pursuits to theology tells me what I am to teach as a theologian. There are developments and applications of Christian theology that only the expert theologian can deal with in an effective way. There are people who get brilliant ideas, but if they knew a little more they would discover that their idea was not original at all, that it had been exploded long ago as a human error. There is a science of theology, and it requires very rigid discipline of mind for a man to deal effectively with that science. But it is not on theology as a science that Christendom is going to be reunited; it is within the Gospel that we come together. The more I study theology the simpler grows my faith, the more childlike becomes my attitude towards the great realities of revelation and redemption. Guthrie, the Scottish preacher, when he was dying, asked for a bairn's hymn that he might rest his heart on it, and, after all, face to face with the reality of death, or face to face with the awful realities of life that are meeting us just now, the simplicities of the Christian Gospel will count for most to us. My great teacher, Dr. Fairbairn, once told one of his students that there are two kinds of simplicity, the simplicity of ignorance and the simplicity of culture. The simplicity of ignorance abounds, and is not fully conscious of itself; the simplicity of culture is not so common, and yet there is a simplicity of culture, when a man has so thought his way through the great problems of theology that they become transparent and the great realities shine through and bring light upon every dark path.

Therefore I do believe that this movement towards the centre, the simplifying of theology, is a great help towards reunion. We shall want fewer articles in our creeds, only we must believe those articles which are in our creed with a measure of intelligence and a passion of conviction such as we cannot possibly spread over a

multitude of articles. Who could be enthusiastic about the Westminster Confession of Faith? I cannot sustain my enthusiasm through Thirty-nine Articles. I concentrate my enthusiasm upon a few great verities of the Father God, the Saviour Christ, and the cleansing, renewing, and perfecting Spirit of God. As far as I am concerned, all the creed I want is the Apostolic Benediction. Exegetically interpreted with honesty and sincerity, I believe you would get in that everything that is really needed, and the other creeds are explications of the Apostolic Benediction. The advantage of the Apostolic Benediction is this, that it does not come as a burden to thought, it comes as a blessing to the soul, and our creed ought to be not a burden to us but a blessing. The more we concentrate our creed on the essential verities, the divine realities, the more will that creed be a blessing to us, and not, as creeds often have been in the past, a burden.

The last thing I have to say is this: however simple our creed may be, we must interpret it. I do not suggest that we are not to be constantly using our minds in applying those great verities, in seeing them in all their manifold relations, but, as has been indicated in this brief discussion, what we want is as large a liberty as possible of interpretation, so long as the articles of faith are held honestly and presented distinctly. It is not uniformity that is wanted; it is diversity in unity. It is a good thing for the Christian church that there has been diversity in unity. May I give you an illustration? We take the Nicene creed. There is the term *ὁμοούσιον*. Now brethren, have you made up your mind whether you take that term in the sense in which Athanasius used it or in the sense in which the Cappadocians used it? They did not all use it in the same sense. When you speak of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, three Persons, do you use the word "Person" in the modern sense of an individual, or do you use it in the sense in which Nestorius used it, which amounted to little more than a rôle or part, or do you use it in the intermediate sense which afterwards came to be regarded as the orthodox method of interpreting? We may have a creed, but because words carry various meanings with them, various shades of meaning, we will never be able to compel everybody accepting the same creed to attach exactly the same meaning to every word in that creed. Yet there may be a real unity, because, after all, what is the end of a creed? The end of a creed is not theological instruc-

tion, but personal experience. If a creed expresses, however imperfectly, what God in Christ is to me, and if it helps me in confessing what God in Christ is to me to gain still more out of that gracious and blessed relationship, the end of a creed is fulfilled. It is a pity we have so long disputed about metaphysics, where we will not agree whereas we could agree if we only laid the emphasis upon the experience of which the metaphysics is but an endeavour—and sometimes a futile endeavour—to give an adequate account. The church of the future will gather around the Lord Jesus Christ. Some will be content with a very few articles of faith ; others may feel that they want to take the truth as it is in Jesus and apply it in ever-widening range until they bring under the light of that truth the whole range of human knowledge.

That one face, far from vanish, rather grows,  
Or decomposes but to recompose,  
Becomes my universe that feels and knows.