Editorial

IN devoting this number to the discussion of certain ecumenical issues which are before the Church at the present time, full freedom in the expression of their views has been allowed (as is only right) to our contributors. Involvement in the current ecumenical debate is essential if we wish to make any impact on the contemporary situation. In any case, whether we realize it or not, we all have a hand in the moulding, either positively or negatively, of the history of our own time. Let it be a *positive* hand ! Certainly in the Church of England today, we have to face ecumenical questions as we consider together whether there is any good hope of reuniting the fragments of our national religious life and witness in a single comprehensive church which is truly scriptural and missionary-hearted—whether, in fact, we can do anything effective to reverse the fissiparous chain-reaction which was sparked off by the uncharitable and retaliatory measures of the seventeenth century.

In our last issue we suggested that the Church of England was going about things in the wrong way, and we endeavoured to point out what seemed to us to be a better way forward. We maintain, as we have done on previous occasions, that there is a great deal to be learnt, both from the mistakes of the seventeenth century, and also from the various schemes propounded at that time for the preservation or restoration of a coherently united church life in England. That such schemes, for reasons largely political, came in the end to nothing was tragic for both church and nation. But the case may still not be lost. It is still possible, even at this advanced hour, that these schemes may bear some fruit.

Our hopes in this respect are fortified by the appearance of a book entitled *Church Unity without Uniformity* (Epworth Press, 323 pp., 35s.), the scope of which is indicated in its sub-title : " A Study of seventeenth-century English Church Movements and of Richard Baxter's proposals for a Comprehensive Church ". The author, Dr. A. Harold Wood, a former missionary in Tonga, is an Australian and (significantly at this moment) a Methodist. The book he has written is a fine scholarly achievement and an impressive contribution not merely to the understanding of a past phase of history but also too, to the contemporary ecumenical debate. It could with advantage be made compulsory reading for all representatives and negotiators in the current discussions concerning the proposed merger of the Methodist Church with the Church of England. " If those in the Church of England today who follow the Laudian clergy's policy of 1662 would abate their conditions," appeals Dr. Wood, " the spiritual descendants of Richard Baxter would welcome reunion in our time ".

The vision which Baxter laboured so hard, and unsuccessfully, to realize was of a purified and united national church, with a moderate, non-prelatical form of episcopacy, in which the clergy (carefully chosen and tested Christian men), as the spiritual pastors and masters in their

parishes, were entrusted with genuine authority in the oversight and discipline of the souls placed under their care. To every pastor, in short, as "bishop" or overseer of the flock (*episcopus gregis*) committed to him, belonged the power of the keys: his right and his duty was to govern the flock of Christ by the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. This, it was contended, was in line with the original concept of one bishop to one church—though at the same time it was not necessary to disallow the office of diocesan bishop, which developed with the expansion of the Church and the need for wider and more general supervision in distinct geographical areas. It was important not to forget, however, that in the Apostolic Church of the New Testament the terms "presbyter" and "bishop" were synonymous and interchangeable. The development of the concept of the diocesan bishop was an extension, not an elevation, of the New Testament presbyter-bishop.

This means, of course, as was recognized by the fathers of the early centuries, that bishop and presbyter are not two separate *orders* of ministry. And equally it means that competence to ordain is inherent in presbyters, though it came ordinarily to be reserved to (diocesan) bishops. These facts were fully appreciated by the Anglican divines of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Hence their ready recognition of the complete validity of ordination by presbyters. Episcopal ordination remained the rule for the Church of England; but it was a *domestic* rule. Anglican leaders did not seek to impose it on other Reformed churches which, for one reason or another, had adopted a presbyterian form of church government; nor did they demand the episcopal reordination of ministers from those churches when they came to England and took their place in the national Church of England.

Thus we find Baxter writing in his *Christian Concord* (published in 1653): "What need I tell an Englishman that these objectors are not sons of the Church of England, whatever they pretend, when the world knows that the *Church of England took him to be a true minister that was ordained* in France, Holland, Scotland, Geneva, Heidelberg, etc., *by mere presbyters without a bishop*. The world knows that we did not ordain those again that were so ordained; no more than we baptized those again that were there baptized. The world knows that we gave them the right hand of fellowship as true churches of Christ". This consideration is of particular relevance at the present time in view of the demands being made by the officials and negotiators of the Church of England that, in any scheme for reunion the integration of the ministries of the uniting churches must include the laying of episcopal hands on those who have been non-episcopally ordained—which, however much it may be shrouded in verbal ambiguities, can and will only be interpreted as a demand for reordination (see Archdeacon Bowles' article in this issue). It implies a doctrine of bishops which we reject as unscriptural and unanglican, and also unecumenical.

Baxter's outlook was one of sincere ecumenicity. He realized that insistence on absolute uniformity in every detail could only be disruptive of unity, and at the same time that a mere structural façade of unity would be meaningless and indeed harmful. There were, of

course, certain indispensable requirements, and the primary essential was that of unity in truth and holiness. To this end Holy Scripture had to be given a unique position as the supreme standard to which all belief and behaviour must conform. " Stick close to this one Bible," wrote Baxter in his *True Catholic*, " and let nothing come into your faith or religion but what comes thence ; and when controversies arise, try them by this ". But under this absolute rule of God's Word there must be room for variations of emphasis and preference.

The Millenary Petition presented to the King in 1603 by 825 ministers, none of them of presbyterian convictions and all of them good Prayer Book men, asked for a number of quite unalarming modifications—namely, that the wearing of the surplice, the sign of the cross in baptism, the giving of a ring in marriage, and the use of the Apocrypha in public worship should not be obligatory ; that the terms " priest " and " absolution " should be abandoned, confirmation discarded (on the ground that it was superfluous), and sabbath-keeping enforced ; and that those coming to communion should first be examined, and excommunication not be imposed without the consent of the pastor. Apart, perhaps, from the question of confirmation, all these requests, together with certain others which were put forward right up to the eve of 1662 (see Mr. Windsor's article in our last issue), should have been readily negotiable. As Dr. Wood observes, " had these been granted, unity could have been restored to the church, and the great body of ministers in England (all except rigid Independents and smaller sects) could have been comprehended within the national church. The Church of England would have become a truly national church, governed by constitutional bishops with their synods ".

That Baxter was not a completely unrealistic visionary is shown, surely, by the formation in our day of the Church of South India, which is a veritable embodiment of so many of his ideals, as a national (or regional) united church in which freedom is given for wide (some may feel too wide) variations in the type of worship, both formal and informal, to be used. Since the appearance of our last issue, *The Book of Common Worship* of the Church of South India, as authorized by the Synod of 1962, has been published (Oxford University Press, 9s. 6d.). Its pages should be carefully studied, as they may well presage the shape of much that is to come. In it there are many admirable things, but there are also elements which, judged by the criterion of Scripture, are undesirable, and which for that reason should be kept out of any future book of common worship that may be devised for England.

With regard to the Roman Catholic Church, Baxter was convinced that a comprehensive national church, united on a sound biblical basis, would be an effective bulwark against the errors of Rome, which he, in company with his contemporaries, abhorred. But that did not prevent him from hoping that Roman Catholicism might repent of its errors and be reformed in accordance with the pure standard of Holy Scripture, and thus prepare the way for a yet fuller unification of Christendom. Owning " no religion but the Christian religion, nor any church but the Christian Church ", he dreamed of no Catholic Church but one, " containing all the true Christians in the world, united in Jesus Christ as the Head ".

The greatest temptation facing the ecumenical movement is to seek unity as an end in itself, and in the interests of an all-inclusive policy to mingle truth indiscriminately with error. This could only be destructive of true Christianity. If things should develop in this direction, then those who value truth above unity (though they value and long for both) will find themselves in the position of a remnant regretfully forced to stand apart. In this respect, the Archbishop of Wales, Dr. Edwin Morris, has recently given a wise lead by warning (as we have also done in the past) that Roman Catholicism shows no intention of abandoning its errors. " We reject the distinctive dogmas of the Roman Church," he told the Governing Body of the Church in Wales, on September 24, " —that is, those dogmas which Rome has added to the catholic faith on its own authority—not because we do not understand them, but because we do understand them and believe them to be unsound. As I cannot conceive that the Church in Wales could ever accept these Roman dogmas, I must regretfully conclude that there is at present no prospect whatever of union between us and the Roman Church. We should foster the better relations which Rome is now cultivating, and we should seek to co-operate with Rome wherever we can do so without compromising our doctrinal position, but beyond this we cannot go until Rome is ready to abandon its distinctive dogmatic claims ". In a subsequent letter to the *Church Times* (November 1) he stated : " I see no reason to believe that Rome has abated one tittle of its dogmatic claims. The changes so far contemplated at Vatican II are not *dogmatic* changes ". " Refusal to face facts," he concluded, " does the cause of reunion no good at all ".

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We regret that the rising cost of production has made it necessary to put up the price of *The Churchman* as from the beginning of 1964. The steadily increasing number of our subscribers is, however, a cause for gratification, and we are confident that we can continue to count on the support of our readers in many different parts of the world. We hope also to have the pleasure of welcoming many new readers during the coming year. P.E.H.