

The World Conference on Faith and Order

Edinburgh, August 3-18, 1937

INTRODUCTION

At the time when the Edinburgh Conference was being held, numerous purely descriptive articles appeared in the daily and weekly press. In the perspective which even a few months' distance gives, it is possible now to proceed to evaluate its significance for the churches. This article will attempt to supply the main considerations upon which a balanced estimate can be based.

A preliminary apology is perhaps not out of place, that one who was present at the Conference only as a member of the Youth Group and as an interpreter should presume to pass judgment in any way on so august a gathering. The author is conscious of the delicacy of his position, and will walk warily and humbly. He feels at the same time that his experience of the Faith and Order Movement during a number of years, and the good fortune which has enabled him to see it in the wider perspective of the Oecumenical Movement as a whole, together with experience as an interpreter which has made him enter imaginatively into the world of thought of church traditions other than his own, are enough to acquit him of the charge of darkening counsel by words without knowledge. And he writes in full consciousness of his responsibility as an interpreter towards both the Faith and Order Movement and the church to which he is interpreting its work.

It is important to bear in mind from the outset the fact that the Edinburgh Conference of 1937 cannot be rightly judged except as *a stage in a process*. It is not a thing complete in itself. It shares with the other Christian world conferences of the moment (Mysore 1937; Oxford 1937; Madras 1938; Amsterdam 1939) the background of the history of the Oecumenical Movement as a whole. It has its own background also, in the Lausanne Conference of

1927, the frequent meetings since then of its Continuation Committee, and the serious study done on its behalf by eminent theologians of many churches during a number of years. It is itself a *demonstration* and an *experiment* rather than a finished product—a demonstration to the world of the will to unity of the Church of God: an experiment within the Church designed both to discover the present attitude of the churches to their agreements and disagreements, and also to promote a less exclusively self-centred and complacent attitude than that which is so natural and easy to those who live in isolation. Any true criticism of its work must bear these facts in mind, acknowledge its own tentative and provisional character, and take the form of constructive suggestions for future work rather than negative disparagement of what has already been done.

One further most important preliminary point is that the Faith and Order Movement in general, and the Edinburgh Conference in particular, represent, not an attempt to impose an unwanted union *ab extra* upon unwilling churches, but an attempt to *prepare the way of the Lord* who alone can heal the wounds of His Church, so that the unity for which He prayed may receive more adequate expression, not in the triumph of any one party over another, but in the victory of Christ over us all. This attempt is being made out of a deep conviction that the Divine Commission to the Church cannot be adequately fulfilled without a more convincing demonstration to the world of the spirit of reconciliation which our Lord came to bring, and that we must be one before the world can come to believe in the Divine Mission of our Lord (John xvii. 21). There is a *missionary motive* behind the technical theological discussions which form the main part of its work.

We may now proceed to give a short description of the Conference itself, and then to analyse the positive significance and the limitations of its work.

FACTS AND FIGURES ABOUT THE CONFERENCE

359 official delegates, 84 alternates, a youth group of 53, together with a few extra members of Commissions, made up the total attendance of 504. The delegates represented 123 different churches and 43 different countries. The two most notable and much regretted absentees were the

German Evangelical Church and the Roman Catholic Church (which had one or two unofficial observers present none the less).

The proceedings of the Conference were conducted in a framework of prayer ; for each morning there was a Service in St Giles, and each evening there was a closing act of worship in the Assembly Hall. An attempt had been made to secure that the morning Services should follow the varying usages of the several traditions represented. The evening devotions generally followed an abridged order of Compline. Further, the Church of Scotland provided a Communion Service for members of the Conference ; the Eastern Orthodox members held liturgical Services which members might attend ; and on both Sunday evenings there were public meetings at which representative members witnessed to the meaning for their own life of the worship and devotional life of their churches. (We shall return to the matter of worship in our critique.)

The most fundamental part of the study of the Conference took place in the four Sections, which met during the first half of the Conference to discuss the four subjects of the programme—(1) the Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ ; (2) the Church of Christ and the Word of God ; (3) the Ministry and Sacraments ; (4) the Church's Unity in Life and Worship—on the basis of the very substantial preliminary work done by commissions of theologians. These Sections did not discuss the problems entrusted to them as abstract theological issues ; they had always in view the concrete aim of bringing out clearly the extent to which real unity could be affirmed, the extent to which existing divergences might be regarded as *adiaphora* affording no real ground for continuance in separation, and the points at which fundamental difficulties in the way of closer union arose and required further consideration. They produced Reports which were thoroughly revised in plenary session during the second half of the Conference, and then issued as the Conference Report, to be “submitted for the consideration of the participating churches”.

It is impossible even to summarise the contents of the Conference Report in an article of this kind ; for it deals with many and very complex questions. The two outstanding features which it presents are the surprising extent of agreement affirmed in the Section on Grace, and the not at all surprising extent of disagreement acknowledged in the Section on the Ministry and Sacraments. (We shall

return to this point in our critique.) The full Report may be obtained *gratis* from the Secretariat of the Continuation Committee, Christ Church, Oxford. It contains not only the findings of the Conference on the four main subjects, but also a bibliography, and two exceedingly important pronouncements : one an affirmation of Union in Allegiance to our Lord Jesus Christ, the other a decision concerning a proposed World Council of Churches. Each of these last deserves a paragraph to itself.

The Affirmation of Union contains these words :

"We are one in faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word of God. We are one in allegiance to Him as Head of the Church, and as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. We are one in acknowledging that this allegiance takes precedence of any other allegiance that may make claims upon us. . . .

"We humbly acknowledge that our divisions are contrary to the will of Christ. . . .

"We are convinced that our unity of spirit and aim must be embodied in a way that will make it manifest to the world, though we do not yet clearly see what outward form it should take.

"We believe that every sincere attempt to co-operate in the concerns of the Kingdom of God draws the severed communions together in increased mutual understanding and goodwill. We call upon our fellow-Christians of all communions to practise such co-operation, to consider patiently occasions of disunion that they may be overcome ; to be ready to learn from those who differ from them ; to seek to remove those obstacles to the furtherance of the Gospel in the non-Christian world which arise from our divisions ; and constantly to pray for that unity which we believe to be our Lord's will for His Church.

"We desire also to declare to all men everywhere our assurance that Christ is the one hope of unity for the world in face of the distractions and dissensions of this present time. . . ."

The decision concerning *the proposed World Council of Churches* is of the very greatest importance for the future of the Faith and Order Movement and indeed of the Oecumenical Movement as a whole. It follows upon the Report submitted to both the Oxford Conference of the Life and Work Movement and the Edinburgh Conference by a Committee representative of both Movements which had been appointed to review the whole position of the

Oecumenical Movement and the most effective method of conducting its future activities. The recommendation of that Committee was in effect that a World Council of Churches should be established, to include, promote, and co-ordinate the interests of both the Movements concerned, which hitherto have lived and worked in separation (for historical reasons only), and to stand before the world and the churches as the supreme representative of the oecumenical interest and concern as a whole. The Edinburgh Conference did not feel that the proposal was ripe for unconditional acceptance, and drew up a statement of conditions essential to its co-operation; but it gave a sympathetic welcome to the general plan, commended it to the favourable consideration of the churches, and set up machinery whereby it can be worked out more fully for further consideration and approval by the Continuation Committee of the Conference. Despite the necessarily somewhat cautious terms of this decision, we may say already that it inaugurates a new era in oecumenical work. The World Council, when formed, will be a much easier thing for the specialist to explain and the layman to understand than the present organisations; it will stand before the world for the one concern which animates both movements; and it will enlist the energies of the two movements in a collaboration which will enrich the thought and life of both.

These, then, are the results of the work of the Conference. How are we to regard them?

THE POSITIVE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CONFERENCE

We have already pointed out that the Conference was a *demonstration* to the world of the will-to-unity of the Church of God and as an *experiment* within the churches. The former point requires no elaboration. The latter point needs somewhat fuller treatment if we are to see clearly the necessity, the difficulty, and the value of an experiment of this kind.

First of all, then, it is *necessary* to bring the churches together, because they all confess the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, all acknowledge that their separations make their witness to it weak and unconvincing, and all feel that they must *obey the call of God* through His Word and through the world situation to set their houses in order,

that their witness may be strong, The Edinburgh Conference helped to meet that need.

Secondly, this kind of experiment is an extraordinarily *difficult* one. Long continuance in separation has produced widely divergent habits of thought. The problem of inter-church interpretation goes far deeper than the technical problem of the translation of words from one language to another ; it includes the problem of conveying the unconscious or unexpressed presuppositions which determine the whole outlook and attitude of mind of a representative of any given tradition, and may make a statement of his, which receives the enthusiastic approval of other members of his own tradition, almost or completely unintelligible to members of another tradition based on other presuppositions. A very long and painful *process of education* is necessary in order to enable the representatives of all the traditions to see from the inside the points of view of the others, so that, even though they may still disagree at many points, they will understand why they are disagreeing. This educational process must include worship as well as doctrinal discussion ; for any given form of worship both expresses a quite definite view as to the right way of giving glory to God (orthodoxy) and also impresses that view upon the worshippers so that it becomes part of their very life and determines their thought about the Faith. The Edinburgh Conference has helped in this difficult process.

Thirdly, an experiment of this kind has the very great *value* of bringing representatives of all the traditions to see their points of disagreement in a *quite new perspective*. After they have met, they may see their differences even more clearly than before ; but now the differences do not take up the whole horizon of their mental vision, and do not represent their whole experience of or attitude to one another. For they have had the surprising and sometimes almost unwelcome experience of being obliged by the *testimonium sancti spiritus internum* to recognize a truly Christian spirit in those who hold theological positions and represent ecclesiastical traditions radically different from their own. They have been brought to a point where they must acknowledge that there is a Soul of the Church transcending existing ecclesiastical barriers, and feel the obligation to strive for a more adequate embodiment of that soul than any that yet exists. This is no sentimentality, but a recognition of sober reality ; and it provides the only solid basis upon which the necessary difficult and delicate

work of examining deep-seated disagreements can fruitfully be carried on. And the Edinburgh Conference has been of value in helping to produce this insight.

POINTS WHERE CRITICISM IS NECESSARY

Great as the positive significance of the Conference was, there are certain points at which there has rightly been a considerable amount of criticism.

First of all, it was felt by many that *the presentation of different points of view was not sufficiently balanced*. Anglicanism and Eastern Orthodoxy, especially the former, were far more vocal than any other group of proportionate size in the Conference. While this was certainly not intended as a slight upon the others—while indeed it was to a large degree due to the fact that Anglicanism has devoted far more time and thought to the problem of reunion than most other communions—yet it was tactically a little unfortunate. If the goodwill of others is to be kept, a more receptive and less didactic attitude is required.

This lack of balance was felt most acutely by the representatives of Continental Protestantism. It was aggravated for them by two regrettable facts: the absence of the theologians of the German Evangelical Church and of those Swiss theologians who have been the most outspoken champions of the Evangelical and Reformed point of view; and the predominance of English as the Conference language. On this second point, one Swiss speaker even went so far, in a rather discouraged speech in German, as to say that English was obviously the official language of oecumenism. But it is quite clear that the language difficulty ought not to be allowed to favour any one section rather than another.

It may confidently be expected that one effect of the co-ordination of all oecumenical work and the pooling of experience in the World Council of Churches will be to redress the lack of balance to which we have referred.

What has been said of Anglicanism must not be taken as a refusal to recognise its great positive contribution to the life and work of the Conference. In particular, we must mention the magnificent and entirely impartial Chairmanship of the Archbishop of York and the exceedingly efficient and able secretarial work of Canon Hodgson. For these no praise could be too high.

Secondly, it was felt by many that *the arrangements for worship*, both as a spiritual discipline, refreshment, and

preparation, and also as an essential part of oecumenical education, *were insufficient*. The morning Services were only partly representative of different traditions ; and the "Compline" used in the evening had had the Confession of Sins and Creed cut out of it, for some unexplained reason !

It is an undoubted fact, as we have already pointed out, that the soul of any church expresses itself most in its worship. The Eastern Orthodox quote their Liturgy in theological debate. The author of this article owes an enlarged theological understanding of the living significance of the doctrine of the Trinity, of catholicity, and of the Church, to participation in the worship of communions other than his own. The whole experience of the International Christian Youth Movements goes to show the value of attendance at one another's worship in creating real understanding. (N.B.—This does not prejudge the special issue of Intercommunion, which would require more extended treatment than this article allows.)

Long and careful preparation will be required if the next World Conference is to be more fully representative in this respect. Once again, the formation of the World Council of Churches may be of the greatest service at this point.

Thirdly, *the doctrinal conclusions of the Report are inadequate at two points*: the doctrine of Grace and the doctrine of the Church.

As regards *the doctrine of Grace*, the Report proclaims an astonishing degree of unanimity, and states that "there is in connection with this subject no ground for maintaining division between churches". If this be indeed so, we have great cause for thankfulness. There is some uneasiness in many minds, however, in two respects. It is asked: Has agreement been achieved at the cost of an ambiguity of formulation which allows of radically different interpretations of the terms used? and: Is it permissible to proclaim an accord at this point while ignoring the controversy as to the relations of Nature and Grace, where latent differences become apparent? The first of these charges may be answered in the negative; but the charge of vagueness in definition would be more difficult to repudiate. The second charge might be dismissed by saying that the Section's terms of reference did not include the topic of Nature and Grace; but even if that be so, that question remains to be dealt with. When all due credit has been given to the Section which produced this Report,

which breathes a fine spirit of conciliation and desire for understanding, we must regretfully conclude that its proclamation of unity has been somewhat over-hasty.

As for *the doctrine of the Church*, the fundamental criticism to be made is that it was never adequately considered at all. Some quite general remarks are made on page 11; but the only place at which an understanding of the vital significance of divergences at this point for the task of the Faith and Order Movement is shown is the following passage from page 34: "We are led to the conclusion that behind all particular statements of the problem of corporate union lie deeply divergent conceptions of the Church. For the want of any more accurate terms (!) this divergence might be described as the contrast between 'authoritarian' and 'personal' types of Church". This admits the problem, but does not deal with it. The terms it suggests as a basis of distinction are conspicuously inaccurate and inadequate. They afford no sufficient explanation of the sad disunity of the Report on the Ministry and Sacraments.

In point of fact, *the doctrine of the Church is one specific aspect* (the most important one) *of the doctrine of the relations between Nature and Grace*, which also received inadequate attention. Until this whole complex of problems has been dealt with, no further progress in understanding can be made; and the differences in conception of ministry and sacraments will remain incomprehensible and a source of unreasoning indignation and offence. There can be no doubt whatever that it is to this point that the Faith and Order Movement should now apply itself.

We may add in a sentence the real distinction at the bottom of the deep divergences which exist. It is the distinction between a view which holds that Grace can during this dispensation be present in Nature in the sense of being *ontologically* embodied in it, and a view which holds that Grace is present in Nature only *in actu*, and that it is an unwarrantable anticipation of the state of glory to speak of it in any other terms. Space forbids the development of this point; but it is the real point. It affords a convincing basis for the existing divergences in conception of the Church, the Ministry and the Sacraments. The fact that it is a very deep and difficult theological issue just shows that the real problems of the Faith and Order Movement lie far below the surface and are far more deep-seated than has yet been fully recognised.

CONCLUSION

We may now return to strike a more positive and hopeful note. The inadequacies of which we have just been speaking are only minor blemishes upon what is after all a really striking positive achievement; and our criticisms are intended as a constructive contribution towards remedying them, not as an attack upon the real object of the Faith and Order Movement itself. Such mistakes and imperfections as existed in this as in all human undertakings do not detract from the fact that a very small staff, headed by Canon Hodgson, has done a magnificent piece of constructive oecumenical work which no criticism may legitimately ignore or belittle, or the fact that the Conference represents a real milestone of oecumenical endeavour. The volumes which embody the work of the preparatory commissions, and the Report of the Conference itself, form an invaluable basis for further discussion and study. What is now needed is not merely negative criticism but positive co-operation on the part of those who see the deficiencies in what has so far been accomplished, and also a far more intensive study of the part worship may play in promoting understanding.

For we must above all keep in mind that the methods of secular diplomacy, and the search for compromise formulae, are entirely inappropriate to the endeavour after Christian unity. The way to a healing of the breach must be sought along the way of a deeper understanding of the meaning of the forgiving love of God, by which He has reconciled us all to Himself and calls us to be reconciled with one another. And in a world of warring ideologies, it is surely the supreme calling of the Church of God to witness to the fact that Christians can call one another brothers in the faith even while they still differ from them, and that the Christian Community of forgiving love is the one place where otherwise intolerable tensions and irreducible antagonisms can be borne, through faith in Him in whom God has given us the reconciliation.

No more fitting "conclusion of the whole matter" could be found than the following words from the sermon delivered by the Archbishop of York to the Conference at the beginning of its work:

"Our faith must be more than the trust which leads us to rely on Him; it must be the deeper faith which leads us to *wait* for Him. It is not we who can heal the wounds in His

Body. We confer and deliberate, and that is right. But it is not by our contrivance and our adjustment that we can unite the Church Our discussion of our differences is a necessary preliminary ; but it is preliminary and no more. Only when God has drawn us closer to Himself shall we be truly united together ; and then our task will be not to consummate our endeavour, but to register His achievement."

DENZIL G. M. PATRICK.