

## **Receiving from other Christian communions and overcoming the hindrances thereto: some Reformed reflections**

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As recently as 1983 Thomas Ryan could characterize the term 'reception' as the ecumenical movement's new 'holy word'.<sup>1</sup> Since that time the term has been publicized in publications, discussed in dialogues, and touted as a technical term. Thus, for example, Emmanuel Sullivan advises us that

there is a classical view of reception, viz., the acceptance of a doctrinal statement or a conciliar decision by either the local or universal church, and an ecumenical usage that takes into account the historic division of the churches in their commitment to the ecumenical movement ...<sup>2</sup>

Without wishing to deny this, I should like to point out that what might be called the ordinary language view of reception should not be overlooked. It is stating the obvious to say that all Christians receive things from other Christian traditions long before they study conciliar decisions or partake in ecumenical activities designed to surmount 'the historic divisions of the churches', and even if they never do either of these things. Moreover, what is received in this ordinary way can become variously a spur or an hindrance to reception in the more technical senses of the term. It is also clear that the manner, nature and extent of what is received will vary from time to time and from place to place. That is to say, what is available to be received will be conditioned by historical, psychological and socio-political factors as well as theological ones. As examples of historical factors I might mention that in the area of England in which I was raised you would have looked in vain for an Orthodox church; and I did not meet a Mennonite until I was in my forties. Psychology enters especially when churches have originated in secessions or, as in the case of my own tradition, that of English Dissent, have refused to opt into ecclesiastical-*cum*-governmental arrangements. This leads to the definition of oneself over against the other, and also sometimes to a loss of confidence when, after perhaps a few centuries, the other rather suddenly becomes friendly. It can also lead to charges of treachery within one's own fold. On more than one occasion during the early years of my ministry I heard the complaint, 'I think he *read* some of his prayers.' This practice was deemed inappropriate because the reading of prayers was what the Church of England required of its clergy, and we thanked God that we were not like them. (The remedy, of course, was to learn to pray *ex tempore* in collect form). As to socio-political factors, these also may be illustrated from the English context.

From the dawn of the English Reformation there were those who felt deeply that reformation had not gone far enough.<sup>3</sup> Like other Puritans they sought purity of worship and church order, but they could see no way of achieving this within the

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<sup>1</sup> T. Ryan, 'Reception: Unpacking the new holy word,' *Ecumenism*, 82, 27-34.

<sup>2</sup> E. Sullivan, 'Reception: factor and moment in ecumenism,' *Ecumenical Trends*, XV no. 7, July/August 1986, 105.

<sup>3</sup> For fuller, but still brief, accounts of aspects of the story recounted in this paragraph and the next see Alan P. F. Sell, *Commemorations. Studies in Christian Thought and History*, (1993), Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1998, chs 4 and 5.

national Church as proposed.<sup>4</sup> They became known as Separatists. Their initial impulse was to be separate from the world in the sense of the naughty world, and in this connection they took a cue from II Corinthians 6: 17. They were witnessing in a context of political uncertainty which fostered the idea flowing down from the Middle Ages that national unity - not to mention victory over the Roman Catholic enemies, France and Spain - was achievable only if religious conformity prevailed. One form of religion was to be the uniting cement of the nation. Against this, the Separatists stood for what they called the crown rights of the Redeemer in his Church, believing that it was not the prerogative of monarch or government to order the Church's worship or determine its principal officers. Furthermore they did not wish to encourage any suggestion that one became a Christian simply by being born in England, for Christians were twice-born saints; and they strongly objected to what they regarded as the undisciplined way in which all comers were received at the Lord's table in the Church of England: the world had invaded the house of God. On a good day they called that Church a 'promiscuous rabble'; on a bad day they called it 'Antichrist'. As a result of the stand they took a number of them - including some able, university educated, men were executed at Tyburn and elsewhere in the 1590s. Others, in the reign of James I, became exiles in Holland, from whence came a number of those Pilgrim Fathers and Mothers who sailed for the New World in 1620, together with some who joined the party in England. Those who remained in England led a clandestine existence until Civil War broke out, when the King, and with him episcopacy, was removed, and the period of the Commonwealth and Protectorate was ushered in.

With the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660 the pendulum swung back in favour of the Anglican establishment, and between that year and the Act of Uniformity of 1662 approximately one fifth of the clergy of the Church of England, some two thousand men, were ejected from their livings because they could not conscientiously give their 'unfeigned assent and consent' to the contents of the *Book of Common Prayer* of the Church of England and promise to use it and no other book in worship. Underlying their specific theologico-liturgical reservations, notably those concerning baptismal regeneration, was the conviction, articulated by the Separatist martyrs before them, that the ordering of the Church's life and worship were matters for the Church under the sole Headship of Christ, not the state, to determine. Further punitive legislation was enacted against Dissenters and it was applied sometimes more harshly, sometimes more leniently, across the land. None suffered more under it than the Quakers.

In 1689 the so-called Toleration Act was on the statute books - 'so called' because the term 'toleration' appears nowhere in the Act's title or text. It was an Act designed to extend toleration to Protestant Trinitarian Dissenters - not, you will notice, to Roman Catholics, Unitarians or Jews. In the wake of sectarian strife and Civil War the excluded ones were deemed not merely misinformed, but dangerous; and even that great apostle of toleration, John Locke, could not conceive of extending toleration to Roman Catholics because they were understood as being subservient to a foreign power, namely, Rome.<sup>5</sup> The Act gave the Congregationalists, Presbyterians and Baptists the freedom to worship according to their consciences, and they took swift advantage of this. But the Act was a beautiful example of English muddling through,

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<sup>4</sup> See further idem, *Testimony and Tradition. Studies in Reformed and Dissenting Thought*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005, ch. 11.

<sup>5</sup> See further idem, *John Locke and the Eighteenth-Century Divines*, 1998, Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006, ch. 5.

in that none of the previous adverse legislation was repealed; its penalties were simply not to be applied to the favoured group of Dissenters. This meant that they were still barred from the universities, from holding civic office, and the like; and so we have the entrenchment of the Church-chapel divide, manifestations of which can still be seen to this day. All through the eighteenth century sporadic attempts, some of them involving the burning of meeting houses, were made to turn back the clock of toleration.

Adverse socio-political factors notwithstanding, many Dissenters assumed the role of proto-ecumenists, and of these one of the greatest was Richard Baxter.<sup>6</sup> He abominated the sectarian spirit, thought 'Presbyterian' an 'odious Name',<sup>7</sup> and declared that 'I am a Christian, a meer Christian ... If the name Christian be not enough, call me a Catholick Christian.'<sup>8</sup> In explanation of this I quote his *Key for Catholicks*:

We still profess before men and angels that we own no religion but the Christian religion, nor any church but the Christian church, not dream of any Catholic Church but one, containing all the true Christians in the world, united in Jesus Christ as the head.<sup>9</sup>

It was his decided opinion that 'The contentions between the Greek Church and the Roman, the Papists and the Protestants, the Lutherans and the Calvinists, have woefully hindered the kingdom of Christ.'<sup>10</sup>

I need only add that among early advocates of the toleration of Roman Catholics in England was the Unitarian Joseph Priestley,<sup>11</sup> whose own tradition was not legalized until 1813; and that Catholic Emancipation was largely secured in 1829, remaining anomalies being removed as recently as 1926.

No doubt it takes much more than enacted legislation to heal inner-Christian divisions, and in many places old animosities linger. One of my best friends at school was turned out of the house and cursed at the altar by his ardent Roman Catholic mother because he went to the cinema with a Protestant girl. He came to live with us for a number of days, until my father sallied forth to negotiate with the relevant priest and my friend was restored to his family. From the Protestant side ill-informed anti-Roman tracts continue to be produced, and I know where there is a Christian bookshop in which one shelf is labelled, 'Apologetics: Roman Catholicism and other False Religions.' Of this kind of thing the Congregational historian, Bernard Lord Manning, wrote, 'I yield to no one in my dislike of, and contempt for, a certain type of so-called Protestant propaganda. It is so stupid, so ignorant, so uncharitable, so unfair; its misrepresentations do Rome so much good that it is hard to think it is not financed directly by the Vatican.'<sup>12</sup> More seriously, a reconciliation of memories as between the Church of England and the heirs of Old Dissent is still awaited, and I suspect that the delay is not unrelated, at least in part, to historical amnesia on all sides.

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<sup>6</sup> See Alan P. F. Sell, *Commemorations*, ch. 2.

<sup>7</sup> R. Baxter, *Reliquiae Baxterianae*, ed. M. Sylvester, London: T. Parkhurst, et al., 1696, II, 373; cf. I, 55-6.

<sup>8</sup> Idem, *Church-History of the Government of Bishops and their Councils abbreviated*, 1681, Preface, fol. b1.

<sup>9</sup> Idem, *Key for Catholicks*, 1659, Preface, 6.

<sup>10</sup> Idem, *Reliquiae Baxterianae*, II, 278.

<sup>11</sup> See J. Priestley, *The Conduct to be observed by Dissenters, in order to procure the Repeal of the Corporation and Test Acts*, 1789, in J. T. Rutt, ed., *The Theological and Miscellaneous Works of Joseph Priestley*, 1817-32, XV, 402-4.

<sup>12</sup> B. L. Manning, *Essays in Orthodox Dissent*, London: Independent Press, 1939, 129.

I trust it has become clear from this extended illustration, that answers questions of reception in the technical senses of the term cannot satisfactorily be provided unless due account is taken of what has already been received in the ordinary language sense at the grass roots. When one further considers that every region of the world has its own catalogue of impressions received, for good and ill, from a variety of Christian traditions, realism in relation to the ease and speed at which reception in the technical sense may be achieved is at once engendered.

## I

All of which makes the increase of understanding and friendship between many members of the several traditions during the past seventy years all the more remarkable. It is probably the case that we have not as yet fully appreciated the significant change of attitude that has crept upon us during the span of one lifetime. What have Reformed Christians of the past seventy years received from traditions other than their own? I shall first briefly indicate some of the blessings that I have received from other Christian traditions during my earthly sojourn, while recognising that the lists of others may be significantly different according to their starting-points and their context in the world. (Lest any should at this point wish to label me as a woolly-minded sentimentalist I caution that the dissuasives to reception will follow shortly!).

Time would fail me to list all the theologians who have stimulated me. I have learned much from Origen, Athanasius and the Cappadocian Fathers (though I suspect that the last named would be somewhat perplexed by the rather one-sided way in which they have been embraced by some contemporary exponents of the social Trinity). I find what might be called the evangelical portions of Augustine congenial, his sacerdotal portions disturbing; the meditations of Anselm of permanent interest, and the narrowing down of what Abelard taught about the atonement unfortunate. I have always had a liking for heretics - I think, for example, of Arius and Pelagius - not least because of the deep sincerity of most of them, and for the way in which they caused others furiously to think, and in the end contributed to a more balanced articulation of Christian doctrine. To Reformed ears - and even more to Reformed eyes - John of Damascus's elevation of God's good created order over against those who suspected makers and users of images as idolaters gives pause for thought: 'Is not the ink in the Most Holy Gospel Book matter?' he challengingly enquired.<sup>13</sup> I return time and again to Alexander of Hales and Bonaventure, and I marvel as much at Aquinas's intellectual synthesis as I do at the way in which he managed to keep most of his deep Christian experience clear of it. I think that Luther had the pearl of price in terms of the Gospel; I learn much from the recorded religious experience of Quakers like George Fox, Isaac Penington and Francis Howgill, and from the ways in which Quaker understandings of the light implicitly challenge those of the Cambridge Platonists - an intriguing group of Anglicans indeed. The erstwhile Congregationalist turned Baptist, John Bunyan, can never be overlooked when the Christian way is under consideration; and where the Church's global mission is concerned, the theological and practical labours of the Baptist Andrew Fuller are of the first importance. As for contributions to worship, the Baptists Benjamin Beddome and John Fawcett have left us all in their debt, as have many Anglicans - Newton and Cowper among them, and the Methodist Charles Wesley - notwithstanding the

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<sup>13</sup> John of Damascus, *On the Divine Images: Three Apologies against those who attack the Divine Images*, trans. David Anderson, Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1980, 23.

desirability of balancing his personal pronouns with the objectivity of an Isaac Watts. I can rejoice to sing John Henry Newman's great hymn, 'Praise to the holiest in the height,' provided that I am permitted to omit the verse which speaks of 'a higher gift than grace' - of which I know no such thing; and, incidentally, I even think that Newman has a word for those university vice-chancellors who seem to think that the first duty of universities is to be 'business-facing'. From Newman's contemporary, Kierkegaard, I have learned something of the nature of faith in its relation to rationalism and empiricism. Then there is the Baptist Charles Haddon Spurgeon's pithy advice to preachers: 'Nonsense does not improve by being bellowed';<sup>14</sup> and the memory of fine preaching by the Methodists among whom I fell for residential reasons during part of my childhood and youth. In myriad ways, through literature (the Anglican metaphysical poets are particular favourites of mine), music (from Bach to Vaughan Williams) and architecture (meeting houses as much as cathedrals) I have been drawn into the presence of God. So much for a severely truncated list of benefits received by myself from those of other traditions. Other Christians, differently situated and with different interests would make different lists; but I should be surprised if there were no overlaps at all between mine and theirs, and I should hope that the non-Reformed among them might find a place for Calvin, Thomas Goodwin, John Owen, Isaac Watts, Philip Doddridge, Jonathan Edwards, Schleiermacher and P. T. Forsyth.

More generally, it is encouraging to be able to say that during the past seventy years significant mutual receivings have occurred. On the intellectual front there have been convergences and common endeavours of considerable significance. For example, from about 1930 onwards Roman Catholic philosophy began to come out of the seminary and onto the stage of wider philosophical discussion.<sup>15</sup> In the field of biblical studies the co-operation of scholars from many Christian traditions on such translation projects as *The New English Bible* constituted a prominent example of ecumenical endeavour. Again, where the writing of biblical commentaries is concerned, if ever there was a particular Baptist or Roman Catholic way of approaching the matter, there is no longer. Such Roman Catholic scholars as Raymond Brown and Joseph Fitzmyer are as likely to be cited by the best Protestant commentators as any of their own 'tribe'; and scholars of many traditions have been grateful for those Welsh and English Baptists who well might cornered the market in Old Testament studies during the middle decades of the twentieth century. Nor can Roman Catholic scholars neglect Protestant systematians with impunity and *vice versa*; and as for church history and Christian intellectual history Methodists have contributed fine studies of Luther, and Roman Catholics of Calvin, while the burgeoning field of eighteenth-century thought commands the attention of people of many Christian traditions and of none.

If we look at spheres wider than the intellectual we see that while there are still to be found Protestants who write pamphlets damning the practice of praying with Roman Catholics, across wide swathes of Christian life common prayer no longer raises an eyebrow, any more than does the presence on one and the same educational or ethical consultation of Orthodox, Anglican and Pentecostal representatives.

Individually, and in these more general ways, the Reformed and others have received much from traditions other than their own. But, turning now to the more technical

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<sup>14</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, *An All-Round Ministry. Addresses to Ministers and Students*, (1900), London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1960, 42.

<sup>15</sup> See further Alan P. F. Sell, *The Philosophy of Religion 1875-1980*, (1988), Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1996, 84-92.

sense of 'reception' which relates specifically to ecumenical dialogue, it may also be said that the Reformed have gained much from the dialogues that have taken place during the past forty years (I refer here to official international bilateral dialogues to which the Reformed family has been party).<sup>16</sup> The gains have been in mutual friendship, doctrinal convergence and, in some cases, recommendations that anathemas be repudiated, and that practical steps be taken towards and the manifestation of that unity which God has already given in Christ.

Thus, for example, the Lutheran-Reformed dialogue participants recommended that full pulpit and altar/table communion be established around the world;<sup>17</sup> among the recommendations in the Anglican-Reformed dialogue report is one to the effect that 'where churches of our two communions are committed to going forward to seek visibly unity, a measure of *reciprocal* communion should be made possible';<sup>18</sup> following the repudiation of historic anathemas formally pronounced by the Reformed against the Anabaptists, an initial mutually-introductory consultation between the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Mennonite World Council (1986) led to a detailed study of baptism, peace and the state: the major neuralgic issues between the two traditions;<sup>19</sup> the primary recommendation in the Baptist-Reformed dialogue report is that consideration be given to a church order in which both paedobaptism and believer baptism might be accommodated, Christian initiation being regarded as a process comprising several moments;<sup>20</sup> with both the Methodist World Council and the Disciples Ecumenical Consultative Council the conclusion was that remaining differing doctrinal emphases (notably Arminianism/Calvinism and baptism, respectively) should no longer be regarded as church-dividing;<sup>21</sup> from the Roman Catholic-Reformed dialogue comes the affirmation (*prima facie* encouraging to one from the Congregational branch of the Reformed family) that 'the Church catholic is really represented and exists in the local Church ... It is only by participating in the local community that we share in the life of the universal Church'<sup>22</sup> (though there may be different understandings of 'local'), and the declaration that in the eucharist the once-for-all-ness of Christ's sacrifice is proclaimed;<sup>23</sup> a significant degree of convergence on the Trinity became evident in the Orthodox-Reformed dialogue, albeit the Orthodox set out from the mystery of the incarnation while the Reformed

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<sup>16</sup> See further, idem, *Enlightenment, Ecumenism, Evangel. Theological Themes and Thinker, 1550-2000*, Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005, ch. 10.

<sup>17</sup> *Towards Closer Fellowship*, Geneva: Lutheran World Federation and World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 1989, 28.

<sup>18</sup> *God's Reign and Our Unity*, London: SPCK and Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1984, 82; see further Alan P. F. Sell, *A Reformed, Evangelical, Catholic Theology. The Contribution of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches 1875-1982*, (1991), Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1998, 137-42.

<sup>19</sup> See Ross T. Bender and Alan P. F. Sell, eds, *Baptism, Peace and the State in the Reformed and Mennonite Traditions*, Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1991.

<sup>20</sup> See *Baptists and Reformed in Dialogue*, Geneva: World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 1984, 19-20. See further Alan P. F. Sell, *A Reformed, Evangelical, Catholic Theology*, 142-5. This was the practice of John Bunyan and of other churches in Bedfordshire; and it was the position which enabled the union of The United Reformed Church with the Re-formed Association of Churches of Christ in 1981. See further, Alan P. F. Sell, *Nonconformist Theology in the Twentieth Century*, Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006, 125-7.

<sup>21</sup> See *Reformed and Methodists in Dialogue*, Geneva: World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 1988, 14; *Towards Closer Fellowship*, Geneva: World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 1988, 14.

<sup>22</sup> *The Presence of Christ in Church and World*, The Vatican: Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity and Geneva: World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 1977, 18, 19. See further Alan P. f. Sell, *A Reformed, Evangelical, Catholic Theology*, 132-7.

<sup>23</sup> *The Presence of Christ in Church and World*, 27.

begin from the biblical witness to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus;<sup>24</sup> the Reformed and the Oriental Orthodox agreed on 'the normative function of Holy Scripture for the life of the Church,' and that 'The ultimate form of the Church's mission is to carry the whole creation in all its brokenness and misery before the transforming presence of the Triune God in a perpetual act of praise and thanksgiving.'<sup>25</sup>

Many more instances of the encouragement received by the Reformed through dialogue with those of other Christian traditions could be given, but perhaps the general situation may be summed up by saying that underpinning all the ecumenical progress that has been made is the conviction that unity is God's gift; it is not of human manufacture. As Thomas Torrance put it, 'Unity belongs to the very essence of the Church as the community of people who have been reconciled to God, and to one another, through the life and passion of the Incarnate Son.'<sup>26</sup> If we pass over Philip Henry's exegesis according to which Jesus, in his high priestly prayer had church divisions in mind when he prayed that his disciples might be one (John 17: 21), we can find the seventeenth-century Presbyterian divine in harmony with, and more specific than, his distinguished twentieth-century successor. He declares that Jesus showed

That notwithstanding the many sad divisions that are in the church, yet all the saints, as far as they are sanctified, are one; one in relation, one flock, one family, one building, one body, one bread; one by representations, one in image and likeness, of one inclination and disposition; one in their aims, one in their askings, one in amity and friendship, one in interest, and one in their inheritance; nay, they are one in judgment and opinion; though in some things they differ, yet those things in which they are agreed are many more, and much more considerable than those things wherein they differ. They are all of a mind concerning sin, that it is the worst thing in the world; concerning Christ, that he is All in all; concerning the favour of God, that it is better than life ...<sup>27</sup>

But if Christians cannot create the unity of the Church, they can certainly mar it. Having considered what the Reformed have received from others, what do I hope they may yet receive? I answer: an affirmative response to the invitation, issued in the Reformed family in Christ's name, to all who by grace are one in Christ to join them at the table of the Lord; and secondly, a warm welcome to the same table on the part of those, whether Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Anglo Catholic or Strict Baptist, who currently exclude multitudes of Christians from the Lord's table. With which we come to the hindrances to further reception.

## II

Just as we receive many things from others in the ordinary language sense of 'reception', so in the same sense of the term there are religious dissuasives which

<sup>24</sup> Lukas Vischer, ed., *Agreed Statements from the Orthodox-Reformed Dialogue*, Geneva: World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 1998, 21.

<sup>25</sup> *Oriental Orthodox-Reformed Dialogue. The First Four Sessions*, Geneva: World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 1998, 54, 55.

<sup>26</sup> T. F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation. Essays towards Evangelical and Catholic Unity in East and West*, London: G. Chapman, 1975, 20.

<sup>27</sup> Matthew Henry, *The Life of the Rev. Philip Henry, A.M.*, (1688), corrected and enlarged by J. B. Williams, 1825, reprinted Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974, 241.

discourage some of the Reformed from receiving what others have to offer. It is a bran tub of items which vary from person to person and have as much to do with temperament and taste as they do with theology. Thus, to speak once again for myself: I profess to be a lover of many types of music, but after two hours of solid plainsong I am almost inclined to reach for the antidote of 'Shine Jesus, shine.' Again, there is the Roman cult of the saints, and the elaborate and time-consuming method by which saints are designated in that fold. It is not simply that I think of saints in a quite different way (as will shortly become clear); it is that I find such things as an advertisement in a responsible journal for intelligence concerning miracles which have occurred in consequence of prayers to G. K. Chesterton, in order that the cause of his elevation to sainthood may be advanced, to be strangely ecumenically unhelpful. I am disquieted by pastoral problems which continue to be raised in connection with mixed marriages, and by what appears to be heavy-handed discipline exercised against theologians and ethicists who are deemed to have spoken or written 'off message'.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand I do not find it easy to endorse some of the marketing techniques employed by enthusiastic church growth evangelicals, nor the feel-good religion purveyed in some quarters, nor the gospel of prosperity which is peddled through so many television channels, nor the more extreme expressions of charismatic expression (I think I would know if I had ever been slain by the Spirit). But, lest I appear as a fuddy-duddy who likes a quiet religious life, let me regret with P. T. Forsyth that 'The freaks ascribed to the Spirit arrest far more attention than the frost which settles on the Word.'<sup>29</sup>

But the matters just itemized do not, in my opinion, rank as being of sufficient importance to be church-dividing. As Philip Henry wrote, 'In those things wherein all the people of God are agreed, I will spend my zeal; and wherein they differ I will walk according to the light that God hath given me, and charitably believe that others do so too.'<sup>30</sup> I further recall that what Wesley branded the 'gross superstition' of the Roman Catholics was relativized by his discovery of holiness among many of them; Forsyth rather cheekily declared of the Anglo-Catholic ecclesiastic, Charles Gore, that 'Were there no alternative, Bishop Gore's gospel would make me put up, for the time being at least, with his view of the ministry';<sup>31</sup> and the remarkable William Jay, who ministered at Argyle Congregational Church, Bath, for sixty-two years, wrote that 'I could never regard the differences of the truly godly as essential; and though I have had my convictions and preferences, they were never anathematizing and exclusive. And I could have communed with any of their churches, and should not have been sorry if circumstances had enabled me to say that I had done so.'<sup>32</sup>

The hindrances to reception - now understood not as an ordinary language term, but in the technical sense of the disposition formally to receive what Christian partners of other traditions have to offer, may be classified under the headings: practical matters,<sup>33</sup> and doctrinal considerations.

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<sup>28</sup> For the latest example of which I am aware see the case of the Polish theologian, Waclaw Hryniewicz, *The Christian Century*, 18 November 2008, 18.

<sup>29</sup> P. T. Forsyth, *Faith, Freedom, and the Future*, (1912), London: Independent Press, 1955, 41.

<sup>30</sup> P. Henry in his *Life*, 127.

<sup>31</sup> P. T. Forsyth, *The Principle of Authority*, (1915), London: Independent Press, 1952, 224.

<sup>32</sup> George Redford and John Angell James, *The Autobiography of William Jay*, (1854), Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974, 165.

<sup>33</sup> See further, Alan P. F. Sell, *Enlightenment, Ecumenism, Evangel*, 276-8; idem, 'The role of bilateral dialogues within the one ecumenical movement,' *The Ecumenical Review*, XLVI no. 4, October 1994, 453-460.

*Practical matters.* First, I have already remarked upon the fact that not every Christian world communion is found in every part of the world. Accordingly it is not surprising if some members of a particular communion feel little connection to the report of a dialogue between their global family and a tradition with which they have never had any contact. Secondly, from the South, where in some regions the number of Christians is increasing exponentially, the charge is sometimes levelled that ecumenical dialoguing is a Western hobby, concerned with histories and disputes which are of no concern to them. But if we go far enough back we can readily see that all Western Christians have received the faith from aliens; and as for the ecumenical issues being of no concern, one of many possible retorts is, 'Are we then to assume that in your country Roman Catholics, Orthodox Christians and Protestants practice reciprocal intercommunion?' The question is not whence came the divisiveness in their midst, but what they propose to do about it. It is, of course, perfectly understandable that those Christians who serve in countries beset by war, famine and disease will find plenty of things to do before sitting down to ponder dialogue reports. Thirdly, in some quarters the claim is made that to focus upon those ecclesiological issues which are the concern of so many ecumenical dialogues is to fiddle while Rome burns. Instead, it is argued, the churches should devote themselves to alleviating poverty, promoting justice, striving for peace, safeguarding the planet. But why the ecumenical-social disjunction - especially if ecumenism concerns the whole inhabited earth? The pattern of the Decalogue, the gist of much of Jesus's teaching, and the arrangement of some of Paul's letters imply the injunction, 'If this is what you believe, then this is what you should do.' Fourthly, there is the fact that some churches, especially in the West, are currently facing internal disputes which consume so much energy that they hardly have any left for broader ecumenical concerns. Many of these disputes concern socio-ethical issues, and some of them are promoted by highly politicized pressure groups which 'pack the Assembly' to such an extent that the primary objective of church assemblies, namely, that of seeking the mind of Christ and unanimity in him, becomes an ever-receding possibility. A serious discussion - indeed, an ecumenical discussion - of the question, 'On what grounds ought we to determine that some ethical issues may properly be church-dividing whilst others are not?' would not come amiss.<sup>34</sup> Finally, I suggest that much good would accrue to the ecumenical cause if the findings of dialogue reports were more regularly introduced into classes on systematic theology, and not confined to specialist modules as if the subject matter were the preserve of ecumenical enthusiasts only.<sup>35</sup> This would contribute to the formation of the rising generation of ministers and theologians, and might even discourage that reinventing of the wheel which is not unknown in ecumenical writings and proposals.

*Doctrinal considerations.* There are significant doctrinal matters which inhibit - even preclude - full fellowship with some other Christians would, I think be agreed by many within the Reformed family. In every case the neuralgic issues result in the sundering of the unity which God has already given to the Church in Christ by the Spirit. They are all forms of the Galatian heresy: new circumcisions. They all concern matters on which human interpretations are elevated above God's action in Christ and they amount to the claim that 'We cannot have full fellowship with you until we agree on certain points of doctrinal interpretation, or read the Bible in our particular way, or toe the line with us on church order ('If polity is the condition of unity, did not Christ

<sup>34</sup> See further idem, *Aspects of Christian Integrity*, (1990), Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1998, ch. 3.

<sup>35</sup> Similarly with feminist, liberation and other theological insights. These are too important to be the preserve of committed coteries.

die in vain?' Forsyth rhetorically asked<sup>36</sup>). In these ways denominational small print is rendered normative, and the sigh of the seventeenth-century Puritan, John Howe, echoes down the years: 'Without all controversy, the main inlet of all the distractions, confusions, and divisions of the Christian world hath been by adding other conditions of Church communion than Christ hath done.'<sup>37</sup>

Because the matters to which I shall now allude are so familiar as to be boring, I shall be brief. First there is the question of the Apostolic succession as held in the Roman and Anglo-Catholic churches. A Protestant who chortles over the fact that the presumed historic line is confused at certain points fails to understand that responsible Roman Catholic and Anglican scholars have said no less. Nor is it simply a matter of having personal representative leadership within the Church: many Protestant churches have that, and some of those thus elevated could give Anglicans and Romans lessons in autocratic behaviour. No, everything turns upon what bishops are supposed to be able to do; and this depends upon what is believed about the handing on of authority to the apostles in the gospels. The case, *pro* and *con*, has been argued for years, but, for reasons which are too complicated to expand upon here, I side with those who hold that the apostles held an unique role as primary witnesses to God's grace in Christ, but that they did not pass on to successors their own commission, still less did they communicate to their heirs in the faith any special power to forgive post-baptismal sins or to render the Mass spiritually efficient:<sup>38</sup> things which cannot fail to foster the impression that the sacraments are somehow 'done to' the people by the priests, whereas it is my firm conviction that it is the gathered companies of saints who celebrate the sacraments; they are, strictly, churchly occasions, and Christ, not the ministers, is the host.<sup>39</sup> It further seems plain to me that those stand in the succession of the apostles who proclaim the apostolic gospel - something in which not all bishops, nor, to state the obvious, all Reformed ministers, have excelled. The problem is that those who espouse apostolic succession as widely understood (with or without a pipe-line theory of grace) cannot but think that ministries other than their own are deficient; that what pass as sacraments in many Christian circles may not really be sacraments at all; and so you have the bandying about of the bogymen words, 'invalidity' and 'irregularity'. The terminus is, as Roman Catholic documents from Vatican II to the present day have made plain, that other churches, not being in communion with the Bishop of Rome, are not truly churches in the fullest sense of the term.<sup>40</sup> This, to me, is undoubtedly a Roman sentiment, but I cannot see that it is a truly catholic one. I am probably missing something of great importance, but it appears that I am being asked to place my neck into a sectarian noose so that I may become more Roman, whereas I should be delighted if my Roman friends could see

<sup>36</sup> P. T. Forsyth, *Congregationalism and Reunion*, London: Independent Press, 1952, 25.

<sup>37</sup> J. Howe, *Works*, ed. Henry Rogers, 1862-63, V, 226. See further Alan P. F. Sell, *Aspects of Christian Integrity*, ch. 4.

<sup>38</sup> See further P. T. Forsyth, *The Charter of the Church. Six Lectures on the Spiritual Principle of Nonconformity*, London: Alexander and Shephard, 52; idem, *The Principle of Authority*, 127; idem, *The Church and the Sacraments*, 46, 139; T. W. Manson, *The Church's Ministry*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1948.

<sup>39</sup> See further P. T. Forsyth, *The Church and the Sacraments*, (1917), London: Independent Press, 1953, 237.

<sup>40</sup> For an example of this Roman Catholic position see *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 21 November 1864, II para. 22; for further reflections on the matter with reference to more recent troublesome documents see Alan P. F. Sell, *Testimony and Tradition*, 339-40; idem, *Enlightenment, Ecumenism, Evangel*, 293-4; *Hinterland Theology. A Stimulus to Theological Construction*, Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008, 618-623. For some gracious Roman Catholic reflections see Jared Wicks, 'Not-so-fully church,' *The Christian Century*, 21 August 2007, 9-11.

their way to becoming more catholic. For the Church catholic comprises all those in heaven and on earth who, on the ground of Christ's saving work, have been called to Christ by the Spirit and live in him and he in them, and they confess him as Lord and Saviour.

This is the very nub of the ecumenical problem. When Paul tells the fractured fellowship in Corinth that 'the eye cannot say to the hand, "I do not need you"', his 'cannot' is a logical cannot; and to his remark Christians have all too often responded in accordance with the rituals of the English pantomime season which is even now upon us, 'O yes it can!'; and they have hurled sectarian custard pies at one another throughout the course of that not unremittingly cheerful pantomime that we call Church history. Hence the vocation of committed ecumenists who come along with their mops and buckets to clear up the mess so that the already given unity of the Church may clearly be seen.

If those called by grace to be united with Christ gather visibly at the Lord's table and invoke the presence of the Spirit (you will note that I am not referring to a non-specifiable invisible church unity), are we really to believe that God would disappoint them? If so, are we not slighting what God in Christ has done by the Spirit? If not, how could we justifiably attach the labels of invalidity or irregularity to what is taking place, as some persist in doing? As the Congregational lay historian, Bernard Lord Manning wrote long ago,

The entire conception of *validity* and *regularity*, *invalidity* and *irregularity*, applied to the means of grace and the action of the Body of Christ, is both ludicrous and blasphemous. If God acts at all He cannot act invalidly or irregularly; and if God is not acting in the Church there is no action; for the Church has no meaning whatever as a human society apart from God's action. ... We simply do not know what an irregular or an invalid celebration is. We do not deal in percentages with the grace of God.<sup>41</sup>

Clearly related to the foregoing is the large question of papal primacy, a matter on which John Paul II expressed the hope that his Church and others would join in seeking the way forward.<sup>42</sup> I wish only to say here that this is far more than a matter of a useful figure-head for an international body (the Church differs in many important respects from Walmart or Shell), though I have heard some ecumenists talk in this strangely pragmatic way.<sup>43</sup> On the contrary, since 1870 dogmas that the Pope has promulgated *ex cathedra* are required to be believed by the faithful, and are deemed to be infallible. It is not simply that the dogmas spelled out may be thought problematic by many; much more serious is the fact that dogmas deemed infallible logically cannot be revised or rescinded even under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. No doubt the reply will be that the dogmas were themselves deliverances of the Spirit, who may, therefore, be deemed to be in favour of them. But our grasp of the will and purposes of God is always inadequate, God being who he is and we being who we

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<sup>41</sup> B. L. Manning, *Essays in Orthodox Dissent*, 75, 116; cf. *ibid.*, 133, 166. Cf. P. T. Forsyth, *The Charter of the Church*, 56-7.

<sup>42</sup> See *Ut Unum Sint*. *Encyclical Letter of the Holy Father ... on Commitment to Ecumenism*, London : Catholic Truth Society, 1995, 107.

<sup>43</sup> I suspect that the late J. M. R. Tillard was being over-optimistic in his judgement that 'justification by faith, the eucharistic presence of Christ, the primacy of the Bishop of Rome, the eucharistic epiclesis, now appear as essential facets of the Christian truth as such.' Still, three out of four is not a disastrous score. See his 'The ecclesiological implications of bilateral dialogues,' *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, XXIII, 1986, 415.

are; and on more than one occasion in Christian history believers who have been utterly convinced that the Spirit was on their side have subsequently been shown to have been tragically mistaken. It therefore seems ill-advised on the part of any Church to put itself in a position in which its teaching on particular points, being deemed infallible, is not open to revision and even perhaps to repudiation in the light of an increase of knowledge or faith, or both. As the wise Scottish apologist, Robert Flint, wrote,

I acknowledge that we may happily come to know the evil of that whereof we knew no evil before, or the good of that in which we knew no good before. ... I acknowledge that there is oftentimes a great mistake, misunderstanding, error, and unsoundness in the judgment of Christian persons or Churches, so that godly men and true Churches may come to know that to be evil which they sometime thought good, and that to be false which sometime they thought true, or contrariwise; which experience hath taught, and may teach again. ... I confess it is no shame for an Augustine to write a book of Retractions.<sup>44</sup>

An infallibilist stance which precludes any of this is, as it seems to me, ill advised; it precludes ecumenical advance, and it is conceivable that persistence in it would exclude the possibility of further illumination by the Holy Spirit.

I suggest that the underlying issue concerns the doctrine of doctrinal development, a matter on which there has been a profound silence in the international dialogues with which I have been associated. I have elsewhere sought to analyse the concept of doctrinal development, not least because I think that differing assumptions concerning the meaning of the term, and the grounds on which some developments are deemed legitimate whilst others are not, account for a good deal of the 'talking past' one another that can occur in dialogues.<sup>45</sup> Here I simply note the topic as an item which ought to be among the agenda of ecumenical consultations.

Inextricably linked to the idea of development<sup>46</sup> is that of authority: in particular, the locus of authority. In this connection the two familiar candidates are Scripture and Tradition. Much could be said at this point, but my shorthand thesis is that neither of these, severally or together, will yield an adequate foundation for Christian faith, life and witness. It is manifestly the case that so long as there are Christians both the Bible and Tradition will be construed, honoured, and side-stepped in diverse ways. Moreover the divergent interpretations offered are detectable not only between various Christian communions, but within them. All of this is so obvious as to need no argument. But one illustration may be appropriate. In my account of hindrances to reception I have concentrated upon the Roman Catholic Church because the hindrances there are of paramount importance from the point of view of the withholding of full fellowship from millions of those who are already one in Christ. But it is also the case, as I hinted earlier, that there are Protestant forms of the Galatian heresy no less than Roman and Anglo-Catholic ones. In particular there is the elevation of an allegedly inerrant Bible (though proponents differ over whether the Bible is inerrant throughout and therefore reliable as science and history, or whether is inerrant only where it speaks of doctrinal matters, which are then often ranked

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<sup>44</sup> R. Flint, *On Theological, Biblical, and Other Subjects*, Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1905, 77.

<sup>45</sup> See Alan P. F. Sell, *Enlightenment, Ecumenism, Evangel*, ch. 6.

<sup>46</sup> I prefer to speak of doctrinal change, since to many ears 'development' connotes improvement. But developments may be adverse. Similarly, when many hear the term 'criticism' they think of adverse criticism and rebuke; but criticism may be positive.

differently by different advocates). Either way, the Bible is construed legalistically, as if grace required the protection of law, and faith is reduced to assent to propositions supernaturally revealed. There frequently follows the further declaration - the mirror image of the Roman one - that only when you interpret the Scriptures as we do will be have full fellowship with you. To this is sometimes added the pious promise, 'Meanwhile we'll pray that you may see the light.' It is another sectarian stance which divides those whom Christ has made one. I deeply regret that this type of fundamentalism is being propagated at the present time by some enthusiastic Reformed missionaries, and I recall Forsyth's searing judgment of almost a century ago:

it is possible for a movement or a church to be very evangelical on the extensive scale but not evangelical at all on the intensive. ... It spreads its gospel over the face of the earth, but not into the thought and temper of the age. It covers, but it does not leaven. ... [Some missions] spread the Word rapidly - but so thin that it cracks.<sup>47</sup>

All of this underlines my contention that to hope for absolute uniformity of belief and practice is, in this vale of tears, to chase a will o' the wisp. We need to take seriously the oft-repeated mantra that unity does not imply uniformity. But to that we need to add the thought that it does not imply religious free-wheeling either. What it genuinely implies is that our given unity in Christ is of more importance than our interpretations of doctrine and polity. Our final authority is the risen and exalted Christ to whom the Bible and the Church, when in faithful mode, bear witness. Or as Forsyth put it, 'Our final authority is our new Creator. The authority cannot, therefore, be either a Church or a Book - both of which are historically the products of such communion with God. They did not exist till it did, and therefore could not be the cause of its existence.'<sup>48</sup> The seventeenth-century Congregationalist Thomas Goodwin said it well:

If a Christian's judgments be well and thoroughly grounded in the doctrine of God's free grace and eternal love, and of redemption through Jesus Christ alone, and in the most spiritual inward operations of God's Spirit, experimentally communicated, that will fence them against all errors, and from taking in of any falsehood of great moment.<sup>49</sup>

No doubt; but realism and humility prompt the acknowledgement that this is something to be aspired to, not brandished as a trophy. Nevertheless Goodwin's reference to free grace, eternal love and redemption does prompt us towards that

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<sup>47</sup> P. T. Forsyth, *Faith, Freedom, and the Future*, 93-4.

<sup>48</sup> *Idem*, *The Principle of Authority*, 53.

<sup>49</sup> T. Goodwin, *Exposition of Ephesians*, Premise, in W. Wilson, *The Attributes of God as they may be contemplated by the Christian for edification, peace, and consolation, Selected from Charnock, Goodwin, Bates, and Wishart*, London: R. B. Seeley and W. Burnside, 1835, 231. It is interesting to compare Goodwin's remarks with those of the Cambridge Platonist, John Smith, in the introduction to *A Discourse concerning the true Way or Method of attaining to Divine Knowledge*, in his *Select Discourses*, London: J. Flesher, 1660, 4. Goodwin would have endorsed Smith's words, 'It is but a thin, airy knowledge that is got by mere speculation which is ushered in by syllogisms and demonstrations,' but whereas Goodwin drives directly to grace, redemption by Christ and illumination by the Spirit, Smith appeals for the reunion of truth and goodness: 'The reason why ... truth prevails no more in the world, is, we so often disjoin truth and true goodness ...'

lateral thinking apart from which I cannot conceive how the divided Christian communions will ever be able to manifest that unity in Christ which God has already given to us.

### III

In saying that the great ecumenical need is of lateral thinking, what I have in mind is that Christians of all traditions should make a strenuous effort to think, not in terms of what we stand for, how we compute the *ordo salutis*, how we understand the Bible or the ministry and sacraments, or even what we have to offer to all the other Christians. We need to think in terms of a radical realism which asks, bluntly, 'What has God done, and for whom has he done it?' Seriously to address this question will, I believe, direct us to the Gospel, to a neglected aspect of ecclesiology, and thence to the implications for revitalized inter-communion fellowship. I shall offer a few remarks upon each of these.

If I am asked, 'What has God done?' I cannot answer without going straight to the Cross. I am an unrepentant theologian of the Cross.<sup>50</sup> I know very well that the incarnation is both temporally and logically prior to the Cross, since Bethlehem preceded Calvary and Christ can do what he does on the Cross only because he is who he is; I further understand that what Calvin called 'the whole course of his obedience'<sup>51</sup> is integral to his work; and I think of the term 'Cross' as denoting not only the crucifixion but also the resurrection and ascension which confirm the Good Friday victory. Nevertheless, against those incarnationalisms that can so easily be transmogrified into idealistic immanentisms which have the final effect of uprooting the Gospel from history,<sup>52</sup> I insist that at the Cross, in the one, full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice of Christ, something was done, not merely shown, to vanquish sin and all that could keep us from God. It is on the ground of this act that the Church is called into being. The good news comes first: 'The Church,' said Bernard Manning, 'is the creation, not the proprietor of the Good News. The Gospel is not what the Church proclaims: the Church is that which proclaims the Gospel.'<sup>53</sup> All of which is to say that at the deepest level the Church's unity is in the Gospel of God's grace. The negative implication of this is that our unity is, as Forsyth said, 'not in the traditional polity, creed, or cultus we inherit. If unity is in polity, Christ died in vain.'<sup>54</sup> Positively, as he elsewhere put it, 'The prime duty of the Church is not to impress, not even to save, men, but to confess the Saviour ... The Church is there as the great confessor, in thought, word, and deed, of its Creator.'<sup>55</sup>

On the ground of the Son's saving work, as I said, saints are called to the Father by the Spirit through the proclamation of the Gospel. Whereas Jesus is Son of God by right, the saints are those who by grace are adopted as God's sons and daughters. They

<sup>50</sup> See, for example, Alan P.F. Sell, *Enlightenment, Ecumenism, Evangel*, ch. 13.

<sup>51</sup> J. Calvin, *Institutes*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. J. T. McNeil, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 2 vols., 1961, II.xvi.5.

<sup>52</sup> I seem to have been harping on this theme for years. See, for example, *Theology in Turmoil. The Roots, Course and Significance of the Conservative-Liberal Debate in Modern Theology*, (1986, but including papers published from 1977), Eugene, OR: 1998, ch. 1; idem, *Philosophical Idealism and Christian Belief*, (1995), Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006; idem, *Enlightenment, Ecumenism, Evangel*, 392-5.

<sup>53</sup> B. L. Manning, *Essays in Orthodox Dissent*, 73. Cf. P. T. Forsyth, *The Cruciality of the Cross*, (1909), London: Independent Press, 1957, 50 n. 1.

<sup>54</sup> P. T. Forsyth, *Congregationalism and Reunion*, 21.

<sup>55</sup> Idem, *Faith, Freedom, and the Future*, 220.

stand where they do not because of any merit of their own, but only because they have become 'saints by calling' (Romans 1: 7). They are regenerate, 'twice-born', whether or (more usually) not they can date a conversion experience. They have experienced God's grace, and they know it in fellowship with all who have likewise been called. Their response to God's gracious call is their enabled repentance and faith.<sup>56</sup> Once again there is realism here: we are not concerned with a spiritual fellowship conceived in terms of the invisible Church - a posture which can be world-denying and escapist.<sup>57</sup> On the contrary, by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we are drawn into the communion of visible saints - surrounded indeed by the cloud of witnesses who have preceded us; but a communion into which we are engrafted now with a view to praise and service. It is impossible to be a Christian 'in general'. To be a Christian is to be engrafted into Christ the Vine, and hence to be in living relation with all the other branches. To be a Christian is to be a saint in fellowship with other saints here and now and hereafter. It follows that 'What the Gospel created was not a crowd of Churches but the one Church in various places',<sup>58</sup> and the only way of being a member of the Church catholic is to gather with, and be anchored among, the saints locally.

However all of this may strike others, to me it is as plain as the nose on my face. I therefore find it astonishing that in the international and other bi- and multilateral dialogues of which I am aware so little attention has been paid to what the old divines called the matter of the Church. We hear much of the nature of the Church, its ministry, sacraments and order; but the question 'Who are the Church?' has not, I think, received the attention it deserves. Yet there is a real need of careful investigation of this issue, not least because the position I have outlined - and I believe it to be biblically grounded and, indeed, unanswerable, is threatened by a variety of views which are commonly held in certain quarters. For example, it is threatened by popular establishment views which suppose that one is somehow made a Christian by virtue of being born in a particular county which has a national Church. It is threatened by views which contend that one becomes a Christian simply by the fact of having been baptized. I am well aware that in saying this I am setting my face against the doctrine that regeneration is necessarily temporally related to baptism, and I certainly think that the baptized infants of the saints are themselves within the covenant community, but they are so as catechumens, and their initiation is as yet incomplete. Bernard Manning once more: 'We do not baptise [infants] in order to make them children of God. That is the false and hideous doctrine of Romanists and Anglo-Catholics. We baptise them because they are already God's. They are not outside His Kingdom until it occurs to them to enter it or until it occurs to us to push them into it. The water of baptism declares that they are already entitled to all God's

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<sup>56</sup> In an article entitled, 'The institutional unity we must reject,' *The British Weekly*, 21 March 1963, 9, the Methodist Old Testament scholar, Norman Snaith, declares that 'There is one way and one way only into the Christian Church, and this way is repentance and faith. There is no other condition. To impose any other condition is false and is against the Gospel.' But this is too anthropocentric, and might even suggest that repentance and faith are 'works'. Hence my use of the word 'enabled'. Faith is always a gift, so that none may boast (Ephesians 2: 8-9), and repentance and answering love are prompted as the Gospel is received. At the same time, the faithful response is genuinely ours, but the Father's act of eliciting logically precedes it, so that we testify, 'I, yet not I but Christ.' In salvation the initiative is always divine.

<sup>57</sup> For a concise critique of the notion that 'spiritual unity' will suffice, see Robin Boyd, *Ecumenism: Threat or Promise?* Dublin: Irish School of Ecumenics, 1981, 11-12.

<sup>58</sup> P. T. Forsyth, *The Church and the Sacraments*, 68.

mercies to men in the passion of Christ.<sup>59</sup> Empirically, the large number of the incompletely initiated who inhabit the earth suggests that not all who have been baptized actually become saints by calling, or 'twice-born'. For this reason I think that the emphasis in ecumenical circles upon baptism as the focus of Christian unity is over-optimistic and, more seriously, that it glosses over the fact that in the early Middle Ages the question, 'How are we to deal with the problem of the post-baptismal sins of those deemed to be regenerate?' was a major stimulus to the introduction of that sacerdotal apparatus which has so sundered the Church's catholicity.<sup>60</sup> Be that as it may, in my understanding a Christian is an enrolled saint,<sup>61</sup> and it may be that as this century proceeds it will become increasingly necessary that we know who are the Church. Our tendency to value often inflated membership statistics should not cause us to forget that the Bible has more to say concerning the faithful remnant than in does about packing everyone in before it is too late.

In the Church, which comprises those who are saints by calling, a particular kind of fellowship is experienced. It is the fellowship of adopted brothers and sisters, and at the heart of it is that love which first loves God and then those who are his - a love which is denied by those who say they love God and then withhold full fellowship from their brothers and sisters in Christ (I John 4: 7-21). Hear Richard Baxter:

I apprehended it a matter of great necessity to imprint true Catholicism on the minds of Christians, it being a most lamentable thing to observe how few Christians in the world there be, that fall not into one sect or another, and wrong not the common interest of Christianity, for the promoting of the interest of their sect; and how lamentably love is thereby destroyed, so that most men think not that they are bound to love those, as the members of Christ, which are against their party, and the leaders of most sects do not stick to persecute those that differ from them, and think the blood of those who hinder their opinions, and parties, to be an acceptable sacrifice to God. And if they can but get to be a sect which they think the *holiest* (as the Anabaptists and Separatists), or which is the *largest* (as the Greeks and Papists), they think then that they are sufficiently warranted, to deny others to be God's Church, or at least to deny them Christian love and communion.<sup>62</sup>

Lying behind this challenging utterance is Baxter's view, which I share, that Christianity is a Way before it is a doctrinal system. Said he, 'I knew how ticklish a business the enumeration of fundamentals was.'<sup>63</sup> Entrance to the Church is not by outward assent to particular doctrinal formulae, or by the endorsement of particular polities, both of which appear to be *quasi*-mechanistic attempts to engineer fellowship. To repeat, the Church comprises those who are saints by calling, who by grace have made the enabled response of repentance and faith. One of the remarkable features of the fellowship of saints is the ready way in which the saints recognise one

<sup>59</sup> B. L. Manning, *Why Not Abandon the Church?* London: Independent Press 1939, 46-8.

<sup>60</sup> See further Alan P. F. Sell, *Hinterland Theology*, 615-617.

<sup>61</sup> In holding this view I am not thereby committed to affirming the contrary, namely, that those who are not enrolled are not Christians. I make no judgments concerning their present state or their final destiny, concerning both of which I am ignorant. I do, however, find it odd that a person should wish to claim the name of Christ whilst refusing the fellowship of his body, the Church. To the extent that this refusal is a consequence of the fact that the saints, being also sinners, have failed in witness or been unwelcoming, may God forgive us.

<sup>62</sup> *Reliquiae Baxterianae*, I, 112.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

another. Earlier in this paper I listed a number of those of Christian traditions other than my own from who I have received much. That list could have been much longer. But my point now is that when thinking of them I do not think of them in the first place as Baptists, Roman Catholics, or whatever they may be. I think of them first as brothers and sisters in Christ. And those who are such ought to be together at the table of the Lord; and anything ecclesiastical which prevents this, whether it emanate from Roman or Anglo-Catholic circles, or from those Strict Baptists who, with inexorable logic reason that those only are the true Church who have been baptized by immersion on profession of faith and hence they alone may partake of the Lord's Supper since it is a sacrament or ordinance of the Church - anything of this sort is the sectarian leaven of the scribes and pharisees.<sup>64</sup> Is it not a tragic breach of fellowship; indeed, is it not an act of gross disobedience to a Saviour who invites us all to keep his Supper, to bar a fellow Christian from the Lord's table, or to refuse an invitation to communion issued in the Lord's name? 'Love as I have loved you,' he said (John 15: 12). This is not only the quintessence of Christian ethics, it is the pattern for, and the stimulus towards, Christian fellowship; it is also the model for good liturgical behaviour. We have been accepted by Christ just as we are; and he has accepted all of us; why, then, can we not accept one another completely and joyfully?

Mine is not a plea for sloppiness, as if doctrines and church order do not matter. I am not an advocate of the free-wheeling, undisciplined Church; but there is a great gulf between disciplinary judgments made by churches and individuals in relation to particular expressions of churchly life with a view to honouring God and in the hope of restoring offenders, and the *a priori* refusal of full communion to large swathes of the Church with whom one is already by grace united. Mine is a plea for putting first things first; for reckoning seriously with the Gospel of God's saving grace on the basis of which the saints are gathered into a fellowship which knows no bounds of time or space, and for adjusting our attitudes and practices accordingly. Shall we succeed in this? Shall we even embark upon necessary reformation? Or shall we continue as we are, elevating our received traditions and favoured opinions above the good news of God's saving act in Christ, whilst yet looking forward to 'the coming great Church?' But it is already here. Can we not see it? Can we not manifest its life more faithfully? Or shall we, in Thessalonian mode, sit around waiting for the heavenly banquet? That *shall* be a truly ecumenical occasion, where we shall all gather around the one table in the presence of the one Host as one family in Christ - whether we like it or not. In which connection, hear Richard Baxter once more:

We shall then rest from all our sad divisions and unchristian quarrels with one another. How lovingly do thousands live together in heaven, who lived at variance upon earth! ... O happy day of the saints' rest in glory, when, as there is one God, one Christ, one Spirit, so we shall have one heart, one church, one employment for ever.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> I have pursued this theme in greater detail in *Enlightenment, Ecumenism, Evangel*, ch. 11.

<sup>65</sup> R. Baxter, *The Saints' Everlasting Rest; or, A Treatise of the Blessed State of the Saints in their Enjoyment of God in Heaven*, London: The Religious Tract Society, n.d., 54, 55.

