

*Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it"*

*George Santayana (1863-1952)*

## **Can We Learn From History?**

From: The Puritans: Their Origins and Successors

Dr. David Martyn Lloyd-Jones (1969)

There is nothing, perhaps, that has so detracted from the glory of God as the history of His people in the church. That is why I am going to deal with this subject of learning from history. Hegel's famous dictum reminds us that '*We learn from history that we learn nothing from history*'.

Now as far as the secular world is concerned, that is undoubtedly perfectly true. The history of the human race shows this quite clearly. Mankind in its folly and stupidity goes on repeating the same old mistakes. It does not learn, it refuses to learn. But I will not accept this as being true of the Christian. **My contention is that the Christian should learn from history, that because he is a Christian it is his duty to do so, and he must rouse himself to do so.**

My basis for saying this is the teaching of the Bible itself. How often do we find, for instance, in the Book of Psalms that the Psalmist, in order to enforce his lesson and to make his appeal to the nation, recapitulates their history in order to show that the error into which people were falling again is precisely what their forefathers had done. And you remember how in the New Testament, in the book of the Acts of the Apostles, Stephen's famous defence of himself before the Council was really just a recapitulation of history in order to bring out his point. There is also an account of Paul doing the same in Acts chapter 13.

All this surely indicates that the Christian should learn from history. The real trouble with the world is that it cannot think straightly. But the Christian should, and it is therefore his duty to learn in this way. My argument is that it is always essential for us to supplement our reading of theology with the reading of church history. Or if you prefer it, that we should at any rate take our theology in an historical manner. **If we do not, we shall be in danger of becoming abstract, theoretical, and academic in our view of truth; and, failing to relate it to the practicalities of life and daily living, we shall soon be in trouble.** How many of us who are in the ministry went into a church with theoretical ideas, not aware at all of the practical problems and difficulties? But we soon had to learn that what seemed so plain and clear in theory could not be done in practice because of the state and condition of the people. Now it seems to me that if we are careful to learn the lessons of history, and to supplement our reading of theology by that, we shall already be prepared, and we shall avoid many of the pitfalls and the dangers into which we shall inevitably fall if we do not do this.

This is my introduction to what I am going to do. I am going to take a general view of the history of the church, particularly in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. I want to emphasize that I am going to take a 'general' view. In this Conference we spend a good deal of our time, and rightly so, in dealing with particular problems and particular questions; but there is a danger that if we do not from time to time take a more general view we may well 'miss the wood because of the trees'. In any case it is sometimes more comfortable to be dealing with particulars than to look at the general situation. But I believe that we are living in an age in which it is very important that we should take this general view.

It is obvious, is it not, from the history of the church that at different times and in different epochs certain particular questions have had unusual prominence. We are all familiar with the facts

that in the early ages, for instance, it was the questions of the Person of our Lord and the doctrine of the Trinity that were uppermost, and had to be fought out. At other times there have been other subjects that have stood out more prominently. But at the Reformation the first great and immediate question was the doctrine of Justification by faith, as we have already heard in this Conference several times. But it is interesting to notice that you cannot isolate these things; they are all inter-related. So almost immediately that problem led to another, the problem of the church and the nature of the church. All these different doctrines belong to a whole, and whichever you may start with, sooner or later you will arrive at the others. Thus the problem of the church was a very prominent one in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries.

By today there is no question at all but that this is the biggest problem and the most urgent of all. The Ecumenical Movement is compelling us to consider it constantly. In addition to that, we are undoubtedly living at one of the great turning-points of history. I sometimes have a fear that we who are Evangelical, of all people are most guilty of failing to realize this. We are so immersed in our local situations, or in our particular fields of study and of interest, that we are not alive to the fact that we are at one of these great climactic points of history. Indeed I have said before, and I say again, that it seems to me that the church has not been in the position that she is in today since the great era of the Protestant Reformation and the century that followed it. Therefore we can do nothing better than to take a general view of the history of those two centuries and learn certain vital lessons from that history.

## II

I need not take any time in painting the background or in explaining why the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries were such a great climactic age. Up until then, speaking generally, the church in the West, at any rate, had been one and united. Then came the Protestant Reformation. Going further back, before Constantine brought the Roman Empire into the church in the early 4th century, the unity of the church had been expressed in terms of faith and worship and a kind of spirit, or 'inner spirit'. But with the coming in of Constantine, and what followed, the institutional element became much more prominent, and the church from there on became an institution and was governed as such by its hierarchy. So that you had a very rigid kind of church government, exercising discipline and control, excommunicating, punishing by death and so on. But with the Protestant Reformation came the great division in the church in the West into the Roman Catholic and the new Protestant church. The Protestant Reformation seemed to shatter the idea of the unity of the church as being something vitally important, and therefore, immediately, the Protestants were charged with schism.

But- and this is the thing that I want to deal with in particular, the really important thing from our standpoint is what happened after that. That original division led to a whole succession of divisions, with the result that the Roman Catholics have always said that there is something inherently wrong in Protestantism, and that it is fissiparous in its very nature and being, that its history has proved this. This has been the charge that they have brought against Protestantism constantly, and there are many Protestants today who are concerned about the success of the Ecumenical Movement and who repeat the charge.

Very well, let us look at the facts. I think we have to admit immediately that the facts seem to be on the side of that charge. You start with Luther and the movement connected with him over against Roman Catholicism. But history shows that very soon there were divisions even amongst the Lutherans, and right up till about 1580 and the Formula of Concord there were constant wrangles and difficulties and groupings within Lutheranism itself. In addition to that you had the Reformed church coming into being in Switzerland, and looking particularly of course to Calvin and Geneva;

and added to this, the various divisions and subdivisions of the Anabaptists. That was the general picture on the Continent.

Coming to our own country, you had the formation of the Church of England. But very soon other divisions began to appear. I do not want to take too much time on this, but eventually a position was reached in which you had those who were Church of England practically in the full sense of the term, and in addition, Puritans, Presbyterians, Brownists, Separatists, Barrowists, Anabaptists, and later, Quakers, Levellers, Diggers and many other sects which arose during the time of the Commonwealth. In fact, endless divisions came into being.

The history of the Church of Scotland shows this perhaps still more clearly, and it takes a real expert to be able to follow the various divisions and sub-divisions and ramifications. There are books which have charts showing this. When we come to modern times and look at the United States of America, a few years ago I know there were at least ~61 different Protestant denominations. (I do not know what the latest figure is).

**Those then are the sheer facts of history.** What do we say about this? How did this happen? What is the explanation of this? A very general explanation, I think, is that this was due to the fact that the Protestant Reformation liberated men and taught them to think for themselves. When you have been under the bondage and tyranny of a rigid system and you are suddenly given freedom, it is almost inevitable that you should get certain excesses. But that is only a very general explanation, and I want to address myself to this problem: can we justify what has happened in Protestantism? **Are the Roman Catholics right in what they say about us?**

The first answer to that is, of course, that the Roman Catholic Church herself is in no position to bring this charge against Protestantism. Before the Reformation ever came about there had been schisms and divisions and even separations in the history of that very church. Even before Constantine came in there were divisions that occurred. They were regarded as heresies and some of them lasted many centuries; the Novatianists, the Donatists, and many others; and there was always a running quarrel between what became the Church of the East and the Church of the West. The idea that Rome had always been recognized as supreme, and that there were no problems and no divisions, is simply not true to history.

The same continued even after the fourth century and right up to the Protestant Reformation. But Rome, of course, had such tremendous power that she could in a sense contain these divisions. I always feel that the analogy which is helpful at this point is the analogy of the political situation in this country. The great characteristic of the Conservative Party is that she can contain her divisions and subdivisions. The Liberals and the Labour people bring them out into the open and expose them to the public. The Conservative Party do these things amongst themselves and nobody knows what is happening; but when you get behind the scenes you find that there are as many divisions as anywhere else. That, then, is the answer to the Roman Catholics, and we need not be troubled about that. What is of concern to us is, can we justify what has happened in any way?

**I will now give you my thesis. The division between Roman Catholic and Protestant I am prepared to defend to the death; but the other divisions, I am prepared to assert, were sinful.** They were manifestations of schism and all involved in them were guilty, and we are guilty in the sight of God.

Let us proceed to substantiate this contention. The extraordinary thing about all that happened in Protestantism, and happened so quickly, is that, apart from the Anabaptists and the various sects, they were really concerned about comprehension. This is the enigmatic factor which seems to me to come out so strikingly as one reads this history and keeps on re-reading it from different angles--they were all seeking for comprehension. Take Luther for instance: this was his

great concern. Luther was afraid-that these divisions would lead to the loss of the whole of the Protestant Reformation, that the princes and the powers seeing this happening would be annoyed, and everything that he had fought for, and had suffered for, and had contended for, would be completely lost. So he was very concerned about comprehension, and particularly within his own group.

In the same way, as I am going to show, Calvin was very concerned about Protestant unity from his angle; and when you come to this country, Anglicanism and Queen Elizabeth I were of course dominated in their thinking by the idea of comprehension. Hence their Acts of Uniformity and so on. And as we have been reminded in this Conference the Presbyterians held exactly the same view. All these people wanted one national church. That is even true of the Congregationalists at the time of the Commonwealth. It was only later that they ceased to believe in this. Up until the end of the Commonwealth and the Restoration this was the great idea, the idea of comprehension. Here, you see, is this extraordinary fact that while all of them were claiming to aim at the idea of comprehension they nevertheless divided in this extraordinary manner.

The question we have to ask, then, is this: What was it that caused these divisions? What were the factors that operated to nullify this great idea of comprehension? I have tried to tabulate them, trusting as we look at them that we can receive guidance for our day, and situation, from this particular history.

**The first cause of trouble** as I see it, the first thing that hindered Protestant union, was the idea of national churches. Now it is not at all surprising that they should have thought of it in that way, because reform tended to take place independently in the different nations and countries. Not only that, in all these countries there was the time-honoured connection and relationship between the church and the State. So when they broke with Rome it was almost instinctive for them to think in terms of their own national position. They did not want to divide up, but they desired to separate from Rome; and they all viewed it within the sphere of their own knowledge. So they all tended to do it in a national way. You find the city-states in Switzerland doing exactly the same thing. They were concerned about themselves primarily, and because of this old and traditional relationship between the church and the State, the church tended to take the form of a national or state church. That happened not only on the Continent but also here in England, and in Scotland, and in various other places. In the case of England the kings and queens became the head of the church as well as the head of the State. This is a most important factor; and one cannot understand this particular history without seeing that very clearly.

In the second place certain national characteristics operated very powerfully. Here, of course, is something that one could take up and deal with at length. I am not going to do so now because of lack of time. Should this factor operate at all? What is the place of national characteristics in the Christian life, and especially in connection with the church?

Well, the fact is that this has been a very important factor in the case of England. There was a natural independence of spirit and a national consciousness before the Reformation. England had several times objected to the power and the influence of the Pope over her church. There had been many movements in this direction and many protests. A national spirit was arising in most European countries and nations at that time, and therefore when the church separated from Rome it was quite natural for them to do so in their own particular way.

But, in addition to this, I believe that national characteristics operated in many ways. This is a subject which needs to be discussed in greater detail, but it is surely difficult to evade the conclusion that the ecclesiastical differences in different countries have been the result of these differing national characteristics. Let us take as an illustration the difference between England and

Scotland. The typical Englishman has a dislike of definitions; the glory of the British Empire to him was that it had not got a written Constitution. It had just happened, and with the principle of empiricism enthroned, her chief glory was that she had 'muddled through'. I do not make too much of this, but there is this innate dislike of over-precision and too much definition. I am speaking about the average Englishman; there are exceptions, but they are very much exceptions. It is surely very clear that at the time of the Reformation and in the Elizabethan period this national characteristic operated in England. The *via media* appeals to the Englishman, he likes the idea of compromise, he dislikes extremes and excesses and over-precise definitions.

I am not criticizing, I am describing; and I am asserting that we have to bear all this in mind, and that if we fail to do so we shall not be learning the lessons of history. I am suggesting that with regard to the danger today of basing too much of our discussion upon Confessions drawn up at that time we tend to neglect this particular factor; and we do so of course to our own confusion.

The Scots on the other hand, are very different in this respect. They like definitions, and precision and exactness. They demand them, and insist upon them. The whole outlook, the mentality, is a different one. This is something that I could work out in terms of other nations like the Dutch, etc., in exactly the same way. One must not go too far with regard to all this. I know that there is the danger of trying to explain everything in terms of psychology and so on. I remember once reading a book by a man who said he could explain everything in terms of geography. He did not hesitate to explain John Calvin in terms of the cold climate of Geneva. You know the theory that the further south you go the more likely the people are to be Catholic, the more north the more likely they are to be Protestant! At that point, of course, it becomes ridiculous; all I am asserting is that you cannot exclude this particular factor of these general characteristics of people.

This is not only true of nations, this factor is very important also with regard to individual persons. Temperament comes into these matters, and I defy you to exclude it. I am quite sure that a great deal of the trouble in the 16<sup>th</sup> century was due to the personality of Luther. He was a giant of a man, he was a kind of volcano, and so different from John Calvin. Luther was not systematic in the way that Calvin was; he was not governed by reason to the same extent. There was something explosive about the man, and as I am going to show, in certain details this really is a most vital part of the explanation of what I would regard as a tragedy. But I must be fair to Luther. His own history influenced him, perhaps unconsciously. If you read the history of the Lutheran church from, say, 1518 or 1520 right on to 1580 you will find that Luther was in great trouble over the question of condemning people and excluding them from the fellowship of the Church. I have no doubt but that this was largely due to the way he himself had suffered at the hands of the Roman Catholic Church. He had a horror of doing to others what had been done to him. He at any rate was intelligent enough to see this, that if you fought for freedom against a rigid system you must at all costs avoid becoming a dictator yourself. He was aware of this, and I believe that at certain times it made him hesitate to condemn where perhaps we might think he should have condemned.

But then, in addition to that, his views on the 'hiddenness' of the church, and the 'hiddenness' of the Word of God, and the markedly spiritual element in his whole outlook on teaching, militated against his defining things as clearly as Calvin, and putting his ideas into practice in the matter of discipline. I leave it at just that, taking the one example of Luther. There are many other men who appear in the history of that time, and many since, whom one could use in exactly the same way. I am asking this basic question, let me remind you, as to whether things of this nature should influence the Christian position. My contention is that they should not; but I am asserting that they have done so.

**But let us look at a third factor -- politics.** Here, of course, was a most potent factor in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. What was really the explanation of Luther's violent antagonism to the Anabaptists? Surely there is no question at all about this. It was his fear, especially after the Peasants' Revolt, that the views and activities of these people, whom at first he had rather liked, would jeopardise the whole of the Reformation. He knew the reaction of the Princes and Governments, so he did everything he could to prevent this. But that was a political motive.

In the same way, it seems to me, the case can be made out very clearly that Melanchthon - a very different kind of man - in drawing up the Augsburg Confession was very largely governed by a political motive. The Roman Catholics were saying that Protestantism was heretical, that Protestants were departing from the Christian faith, and that the Emperor and the various Princes should therefore oppose it. So Melanchthon's primary concern in drawing up that Confession, was to prove that Protestantism was not heretical, that really it was teaching very much the same thing as the Roman Catholic Church had been teaching except for certain things. This was his emphasis. So if we forget this and stand too rigidly behind that Confession, as the Lutherans did afterwards, and ignore this particular factor in history, namely, political considerations, we shall be taking a false view of the Augsburg Confession. The same thing, of course, is equally evident, and more so, in connection with the Huguenots.

But when you come to this country this factor is still plainer and clearer. The person who really determined the character and the nature of the Church of England was none other than Queen Elizabeth. I do not think there is any question about this. A recent book, *Queen Elizabeth and the Reformation in England*, by Haugaard, is most illuminating in this respect. It deals particularly with the crucial Convocation of 1563, and the history leading up to it. In many other books one can read about the influence of Walsingham, and of Burleigh himself, and of the Earl of Leicester and others who were more or less favourable in general to the Puritans. But the point is that the dominating factor was the political one. Elizabeth was in an extremely difficult position. She was especially afraid of France, so she had to keep on the right side of Philip of Spain. On the other hand the Roman Catholics said that she was illegitimate, that she was a bastard. She naturally disliked that, and so at that point she was against the Roman Catholics. The result of all this was that Elizabeth was always engaged in a balancing exercise. She felt that if the Puritans were given their head, and the church was allowed to go in that direction, then the Roman Catholics would of necessity be alienated and everything might be lost. But she did not want to go too far on that side either, because she knew that if she gave the impression that she was too favourable to the Roman Catholics she would be annoying the great body of her people.

The principle that emerges so clearly is that she was governed by these political motives and ideas. I believe that it can be stated further that in her own nature and temperament she was a true daughter of her father, and that her sympathies were very largely on the Catholic side. There is much evidence that can be produced and adduced to demonstrate that. But above all else she was concerned about her throne, and about her whole position and that of the country. We should give her very great praise as a statesman; but we are concerned about the nature of the church.

But when you come on to James I and Charles I all this is much more obvious. They held the view 'No bishop, no king', and that determined all their thinking and behaviour. The political factor came in so powerfully on that side; but we have to admit that it came in on the side of the Puritans also. People like Hampden and Pym and others, on constitutional grounds, and on political grounds, were opposed to these sovereigns, and there developed a mixture of motives. The religious and the political became bound up together, and the issues became confused; and having at the back of it all this idea of comprehension, and of a national Church, the real spiritual element was generally over-

ridden, it seems to me, by the political one. It is agreed by many historians that the real reason why the Solemn League and Covenant was signed by England in 1643 was political expediency. The English did not want to do this, but the parliamentary army was doing very badly and they needed help; so they had to turn to Scotland. The Scots saw their opportunity, and they laid down this condition: they bargained, and they won the bargain.

Somebody was asking in one of our discussions - if I may digress for a moment - why it was that there was a failure to impose Presbyterianism in the 17th century whereas Protestantism had been imposed in the 16th century? I think the answer to that is quite simple. In the 16th century you had a tyrant like Henry VIII in control; and the power of the Crown and of the Throne were so tremendous that they could enforce anything. But when Presbyterianism became official and the attempt was made really to make it permanent, there had been a rebellion, a revolution; the king was being fought, and the army was becoming more powerful. The king was eventually beheaded and the army gained control; and the army, with Cromwell, was mainly Independent. It was they, very largely, who would not endure this imposition of Presbyterianism. And, later, in 1660 we must not forget the conservatism of the English mentality, and its liking of ceremonial, its liking of titles and names. This is one of the few great countries left in the world that has a monarch. That is not an accident, it is typically English. A fondness for kings and queens, a liking for titles and names, is a part of the whole outlook. The Welsh, for instance, are a peasant people and they have never had the veneration for titles that is found so commonly in England. You cannot exclude this kind of thing, and it did turn out to be a very powerful factor. The English did not like these upstarts who were getting into positions of authority. They preferred, and had always had, a king in control, and while they had more or less endured Oliver Cromwell, when his two sons did not turn out to be too successful they turned with great relief even to such a man as Charles II. They were encouraged, unfortunately, in doing that, as we know, by the Scots who, deceived by the duplicity of Charles, thought there was a real opportunity of establishing Presbyterianism, or at the very least modifying episcopacy very considerably in that direction.

**Added to this there is the whole question of tradition.** I have already been referring to it - a dislike of change. This manifested itself particularly over the question of episcopacy. It was partly also responsible for the desire to hold on to certain ceremonies which had been taken over from the Roman Church, modified I know, but still essentially Romish ceremonies. But episcopacy stands out. You cannot read the history of 1560 to 1640, or even to 1660, without seeing that the one great stumbling-block to every attempt at comprehension was ultimately episcopacy. This was the rock on which they all struck and at which they all foundered, in a sense.

Take, for instance, those attempts that were made to get a modified episcopacy. This was all very good. But Archbishop Ussher's attempt and all others failed. And then after the Restoration when Clarendon got into control and the exiled bishops came back, episcopacy was flying high and it ruled and governed. Everything was in its hands, and so you had the Great Ejection of 1662 and all the other persecutions with which we are familiar.

**Then we come to fifth great cause of these tragic divisions; and that was the trouble over the definition of fundamentals.** To put it in other language, it was the trouble concerning the line of division between essentials and non-essentials in connection with the Christian faith. Or, to put it in yet a different way, it was a desire for uniformity in too much detail. This, to me, is one of the great and most important lessons of those hundred years.

Let me give an example or two. Take Luther, for instance, and in particular Luther's view of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. This is surely one of the great tragedies in the history of the church, this division between the Lutheran and the Reformed Churches. It was almost entirely due to

a division on this one thing. There were other differences, but I am satisfied by the evidence produced by those historians who say that the cause of the collapse at the Colloquy of Marburg in 1529<sup>other language</sup>, was really this one thing. Luther himself drew up 15 points or articles, and Zwingli and Oecolampadius, who was there with him on the other side, accepted 14 of the points in their entirety, and had even accepted part of the 15<sup>th</sup>. But Luther took up his bit of chalk, you remember, and wrote on the table, 'This is my body' - not that it 'represents' it, it is it - and so wrecked the conference on his notion of consubstantiation.

Luther wrecked the whole prospect of comprehension or of Protestant unity on this one thing, on this one particular. As somebody has put it so well, 'The sacrament of communion became the apple of discord'. It is a terrible thing, but it is true. And Luther as the result of this attacked Zwingli and his followers violently, and Calvin also. He said the most outrageous things about them. I am not at all sure but that at that point one can almost invoke medical illness in the case of Luther. There seems to be some evidence for that. However, that is doubtless another dangerous thing to say; but you cannot even exclude that. These are the historical factors that come in and determine men's decisions and their attitudes. However, the whole prospect of union was wrecked, and the whole situation became hardened over this one thing.

There is a very tragic footnote to this. Luther just before his death in 1546 read a little book by John Calvin which bore the title *A Little Treatise on the Holy Supper of our Lord*, and having read it this is what he said to Melancthon: 'In this matter of the sacrament we have gone much too far, I will commend the thing to the Lord. Do something after my death. Pathetic, is it not? But it was too late, the damage had been done; and though he had now come to see that they had gone much too far the position had become hardened. Later it became even worse and the whole prospect of unity vanished because, after the Formula of Concord of 1580, this became part of the exclusive and irreformable system of the Lutherans. That led to the hardened Orthodoxy against which there arose the movement associated with the name of the Pietists.

One of the Puritans of the 17<sup>th</sup> century made a very acute remark on all this. He said: 'Witness the bickering between some Lutherans and Calvinists, as they are by some nicknamed, which have given religion since the last Reformation thereof a greater blow than all the thunderbolts of Rome together.

That is but one illustration out of many that could be adduced from the history of England and Scotland, and what became the United States, this tendency to insist upon particulars which I am suggesting are non-essentials. It was part of this whole problem of deciding what is essential and what is non-essential, what is fundamental and what is not fundamental. It was the failure to arrive at this decision, this conclusion, in a charitable manner that so often wrecked every attempt at true Evangelical and Protestant unity.

Yet, and in spite of all I have been saying, the astonishing thing is at the ideal of Protestant union was fought for during this whole period in a most remarkable manner. William Farel, the man who persuaded John Calvin to stay in Geneva, was most concerned about this and he fought for this. Bucer, or Butzer, again was outstanding in his concern and his striving for Protestant union. And as you know, Bucer had a great influence upon John Calvin and in many ways influenced him in this same direction. With regard to the dispute and difference of opinion on the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, what Bucer said about this was that the dispute was 'only a matter of words'--and surely he was right. Calvin, on the same topic, said that the difference 'was not very grave.

But, most interesting and important, let me remind you of some of the manifestations of this desire for Protestant unity on the part of John Calvin. In spite of the vituperative and unkind things that Luther said of Calvin, Calvin's references to Luther were always not only gentle but generous

and full of expressions of admiration. But listen to Calvin writing to Melancthon: 'Let us mourn together the misfortunes of the church, yet rejoice that we cannot be utterly overwhelmed'. Listen to him writing to Bullinger on the sacrament: 'If we could only talk together for half a day we would agree without difficulty'. That is John Calvin. He is a much maligned man.

Calvin wrote to Matthew Parker, Queen Elizabeth I's Archbishop, in 1560 urging him to induce the Queen to convoke a general assembly of Protestant ministers to frame a plan of worship and government, not only for the Church of England but for all the Reformed and Evangelical Churches. He urged her to do this; and you remember his famous statement, that he was prepared to cross oceans, and so on, to do anything he could to help in this respect. The reply that he got to that was that the Church of England would retain its Episcopate, which Matthew Parker argued, derived not from Rome but from Joseph of Arimathaea! That is how that ended.

Then you are aware, I trust, of Calvin's advice to the Puritans in this country who wrote to him. They asked his advice as to whether they should stand out on the question of episcopacy and of ceremonies in England; and though it may surprise you, Calvin told them not to stand out on that. He did not believe in episcopacy, but he was so concerned about Protestant unity that he could just see that perhaps in the peculiar circumstances of England - perhaps he was a bit of a psychologist and knew something about these national characteristics - they should not stand out on these particular things. They did not accept his advice, but that was the advice that he actually did give to them. Let it be said to the honour of Cranmer he tried to call a conference in the days of Edward VI to deal with this matter, again encouraged by Bucer, who was by then Professor of Theology in Cambridge.

Here, you see, during all these times of divisions and ramifications and sub-divisions there was this great effort after Protestant unity. It is very interesting to notice that the last two great results of this seeking for Protestant unity were, first the Authorized Version or Translation of the Bible, and the other was, of course, the Westminster Confession of Faith. That was the last expression of this concern about unity - Protestant Evangelical unity - in this country. But alas, it all came to nothing, and Milton could complain that 'new presbyter' was very similar to 'old priest'.

### III

There, then, is a very hurried review of the history. Let me try to draw some lessons and conclusions from all this. My whole contention is that our situation today provides us with an opportunity such as the church has not had since the Protestant Reformation. I want to go further. I suggest that in the light of this history we are in an altogether better and more advantageous position than our forefathers were in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. On what grounds do I make that assertion? I do so on the grounds of the tremendous differences between our position and theirs. One is that politics is no longer the dominating factor that it was then. It really did dominate then. It had been the tradition throughout the centuries - Church and State - and almost inevitably they were driven to do what they did, as I have tried to show. That is no longer the case.

Not only that, there is an increasing manifestation of a desire to separate Church and State, not only in other countries but even in this country. But more than that, we are living in an age where nationalism of the type that you had in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries is no longer present. We are living in an international age. Even the proposal and the desire to have the European Economic Community is a manifestation of this. There is a readiness now to surrender certain elements of national sovereignty which as far as I know has never existed before. All this is a part of the climate in which we are living, so that our position is very different. Then in the religious realm there is all this talk and activity with respect to Ecumenicity.

I argue, therefore, that we have a new freedom of manoeuvre which our Protestant Reformers did not have. We have possibilities that they never had. They were bound by what they had inherited in a way that we are not. Say what you like about this age, there is a freedom of manoeuvre possible today which I am not aware of as having existed at any other time. And so the question that I would address to you is this - and I am concerned at the moment merely to ask questions - have we got the same burning desire for Protestant Evangelical unity as Calvin and the others whom I have mentioned had? It is our duty to have it. Division in the church is a scandal. Schism is a deadly sin. The ideal for the church has been put by our Lord Himself in John chapter 17; and we have other similar passages in the New Testament. If we have not a burning desire and longing for this unity of true believers I say we are false to the New Testament. So we must examine ourselves. If they in their extraordinarily difficult situations and circumstances had this desire, how much more so should we have this desire?

What then are we to do? Once more I am only going to put forward some matters for your consideration and deliberation. Each one of these matters, of course, would take a long time in and of itself, so I am only going to give some headings. The first thing I suggest is this, that we really must say farewell once and forever to the idea of a national church. There has been no national church in this country since the Restoration; that finished at the Great Ejection. Every Act of Toleration has been a denial of the national church idea - the recognition of Nonconformists and ultimately Roman Catholics in the 1820s. This has put an end to it in actual fact, though of course, it is a characteristic of this country to say 'Yes' and 'No' at the same time. You have it and you do not have it.

Now that may be allowable in politics, but I am asking in the Name of God whether it is right in the realm of the Christian church. That is the question that I am putting. I suggest that there is all the difference in the world between the idea of a national church and the recognition of the churches in a particular country. 'The churches' in a particular country is inevitable, that is right. You have to have a minimum of organization and naturally churches in a country will work together and operate together; but that is totally different from the idea of a national church. So I suggest that is the first move, to get rid of that notion.

Then the second step will be this - we shall have to face squarely this question of the definition of fundamentals and essentials. Here I start with two negatives. We do not take the position, I assume, as Evangelicals, that was taken by Dr Samuel Johnson. He said: 'For my part, Sir, I think that all Christians, whether Papists or Protestants, agree in the essential Articles and that their differences are trivial and rather political than religious'. The great Lexicographer could sometimes talk nonsense! That is, of course, something we do not even waste time in considering.

But we also have to reject, it seems to me, the position of Richard Baxter. He said that all who accept the Apostles' Creed as a summary of belief, the Lord's Prayer as a summary of devotion, and the Decalogue as a summary of duty are truly Christians and members of the catholic and universal church of Christ. That, as was pointed out to him when he said it in a conference to which I shall refer in a moment, would have included Papists and Socinians into the fellowship of the church, and so it was turned down.

What we have to do is this: we have to discover a position between - the border-line, if you like - between 'a binding condemnation spoken in the name of the whole church, and an arbitrary hereticising in the name of a scholastic pedantry'. Let me put that in other language. We have got to avoid the extremes of 'an unrestrained or unrestricted laxity and an egotistical rigour'. Those are the extremes between which we have to work - an unrestrained laxity and an egotistical rigour. As I have

tried to show, it was the failure to draw the line that led to so much of the trouble during the century which we have been considering.

What is the next step? Well, it seems to me that there is this broad division still, as there was at the time of the Protestant Reformation, between the notion of a general comprehension with Rome, modified but Rome nevertheless, included on the one hand, and an Evangelical attitude towards the church on the other hand. This is the big broad distinction. You had it at the time of the Reformation, but unfortunately, as I have tried to show from the history, they divided up and Protestantism became fragmented. I am suggesting that we now have another opportunity of restoring the true position. There is this big, broad division - the Catholic view, the Comprehensive view, the all-inclusive view on the one hand, and the Evangelical view which is more restricted and particular on the other hand.

Then, having laid down that broad distinction, I am suggesting that the next step is that we must avoid the danger of being bound by tradition, that we must even avoid the danger of being legalistically bound by the Confessions of Faith that were drawn up in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. We must remember that the Confessions are only subordinate standards. They are not of equal authority with the Scriptures, and we must be careful lest we allow ourselves to be jockeyed into positions in which we are just defending the Confessions of those two centuries at all costs and not facing the realities and the practicalities of the situation in which we find ourselves in this present age and generation.

The American Presbyterians seem to me to provide us with a most instructive and excellent example at this point. The American Presbyterians in the 18th century did not hesitate to modify the Westminster Confession. They modified it over the question of the relationship between the church and the State. They wanted a wholly free church, a church that was entirely free, so they modified Chapter xx, Section iv, Chapter xxiii, Section iii, Chapter xxx, Section i, of the Westminster Confession.

Now that, to me, is spiritual and biblical thinking. The Westminster Confession was not divinely inspired, and we must be free. We must use these Confessions of Faith as guides and not allow them to be tyrants. They are not to be rigid codes which we must never vary or change in any respect. Let us use them, let us thank God for them, but let us claim that as Christian people we are born again, that we have the Spirit, and are equally capable of determining the teaching of the Scriptures and the true doctrine with regard to the church. We must remember that in all these Confessions- I trust I have brought this out - there was that historical element; there was the factor of the historical condition at that time because of their peculiar circumstances, and therefore I argue that it would be wrong for us to insist upon adhering to them always in all points and details. We have got to recognize the historical element, and so must examine the Confessions in the light of Scripture. The church must go on being Reformed and she must continue to put herself under the Scriptures.

There is surely a great misuse of the Confessions today. Some are dishonestly paying lip-service to them, and then just throwing them into the Museum. And there are others, it seems to me, who are fighting a rear-guard action by hiding behind them. It is a matter of ecclesiastical policy sometimes rather than truth. I suggest that these are two very bad uses of the Confessions and that the honest thing to do is to examine them in the light of Scripture, and to realize that God calls upon us to do this in our day and generation, even as He called upon the Protestant Reformers to do so and the Fathers in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

I am urging this for this reason, that if we do not avoid the mistake into which they fell we shall also fail; and we have to avoid, in particular, this tragic mistake of going to extremes, and

insisting upon particulars which are non-essential, in a rigorous manner. Take what we have been hearing in this Conference this year. Are we not all agreed that the story is a tragic one - the Christian church divided up, all the troubles and the persecutions and the misunderstandings and the alienations? We are 'the Body of Christ', the custodians and the guardians of the Faith, and people are dying and going to hell round and about us. It is a tragic story, and we ought to be ashamed of it. I say that the call to us is to learn these lessons and to avoid the mistakes into which they fell. There are many distinctions which we must bear in mind, and which I can merely mention. But we must learn to distinguish between error and heresy, between false teaching and a mistaken belief.

Let me quote Melancthon at this point: **'It is possible that we should tolerate as brothers Christians who err but who do not defend the error; yet those cannot be regarded as brothers who promote and defend teachings that have no scriptural foundation'**. In other words, you see, there is to be a fundamental division, and I am suggesting that it is still the fundamental one, the division of Catholic and Protestant, or a comprehension that includes the Roman Catholics on the one hand and the Evangelical, truly Protestant, position on the other. There is this dividing line- 'we cannot regard as brothers those who promote and defend teachings that have no scriptural warrant'. I believe we are back very much in the position of the Reformers of the 16th century, except that we have this additional factor of modernism and liberalism, and so on, which they did not have to contend with, and which really should not constitute a problem to us at all, for it is not a gospel in any sense. Where then do we draw the line?

Let me quote some of the Puritans. Take Robert Harris. 'I will not undertake to define what is so merely fundamental and absolutely necessary to salvation as that without it there is no hope. This much I am sure: First, the fundamentals are fewer than many of both sides make them. Secondly, that every lean-to and superstructure doth not raze the foundation'. They talked about 'lean-to's' you see in the 17<sup>th</sup> century! Robert Harris was a member of the Westminster Assembly. He says there that he is quite convinced of this 'that every lean-to and superstructure doth not raze the foundation'. That is the thing to watch, that you do not raze the foundation: then you can be more tolerant about these lean-to's. He says, 'Men of humble and of sincere hearts, though differing in opinion can and do walk together, pray together, and love one another'. Surely that is something to which our hearts must respond.

Charles Herle: 'But for those differences that are among us, whatever they be, let us rather strive to pray them less than argue them more'. Are we ready to say 'Amen' to that? here is another member of the Westminster Assembly - 'Let us rather strive to pray them less than to argue them more'. Again he goes on: 'However, for the difference between us and our brethren that are for Independency, 'tis nothing so great as you seem to conceive it. We do but with Abraham and Lot take several ways. We are, as Abraham speaks, 'brethren' still, and as they were ready to rescue each other on all occasions against the common enemy, our difference 'tis such as doth at most but ruffle a little the fringe and not in any way rend the garment of Christ'. And, surely, this is the position. These differences are about 'fringes'. I am talking about true Evangelicals nobody else ! The differences are about 'fringes' and they 'do not rend the garment of Christ'.

**'Is there any kind of practical proposal therefore that I can put before you'**? There is, and with this I close. In 1654 Oliver Cromwell - with his idea of Toleration - and the Parliament called upon the divines to define what should be tolerated or indulged among those who profess the fundamentals of Christianity. In effect they said, we have all these divisions and sects and groups; what are the fundamentals of Christianity on which we can have fellowship together? So a committee was set up and the members of the committee were these: Mr Richard Baxter, Dr John Owen, Dr Thomas Goodwin, Dr Cheynel, Mr Marshall, Mr Reyner, Mr Nye, Mr Sydrach Simpson, Mr Vines, Mr

Manton, Mr Jacomb. As I said earlier, Baxter tried to short-circuit the whole proposal at the beginning by saying that nothing was necessary but the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Commandments. But that was rejected. Then they proceeded to work, and they produced 16 Articles which they felt stated **the fundamentals** on which, and on which alone, true fellowship is possible between Protestant Evangelical people. Here they are -

(1) That the Holy Scripture is that rule of knowing God and living unto Him which whoso does not believe cannot be saved.

(2) That there is a God who is the Creator, Governor and Judge of the world, which is to be received by faith, and every other way of the knowledge of Him is insufficient.

(3) That this God who is the Creator is eternally distinct from all creatures in His Being and Blessedness.

(4) That this God is One in Three Persons or subsistences.

(5) That Jesus Christ is the only Mediator between God and Man without the knowledge of whom there is no salvation.

(6) That this Jesus Christ is the true God.

(7) That this Jesus Christ is also true Man.

(8) That this Jesus Christ is God and Man in One Person.

(9) That this Jesus Christ is our Redeemer, who by paying a ransom and bearing our sins has made satisfaction for them.

(10) That this same Lord Jesus Christ is He that was Crucified at Jerusalem, and rose again and ascended into Heaven.

(11) That this same Jesus Christ being the only God and Man in One Person remains for ever a distinct Person from all saints and angels notwithstanding their union and communion with Him.

(12) That all men by nature were dead in sins and trespasses, and no man can be saved unless he be born again, repent and believe.

(13) That we are justified and saved by grace and faith in Jesus Christ and not by works.

(14) That to continue in any known sin upon what pretence or principle soever is damnable.

(15) That God is to be worshipped according to His own will, and whosoever shall forsake and despise all the duties of His worship cannot be saved.

(16) That the dead shall rise, and that there is a day of judgment wherein all shall appear, some to go into everlasting life and some into everlasting condemnation.

They were the 16 points. We have the authority of Richard Baxter for saying that it was Dr John Owen who worded those Articles, that Dr Goodwin and Mr Nye and Mr Simpson were his assistants, that Dr Reynolds was the scribe and that Mr Marshall, a sober, worthy man did something, but the rest were little better than passive.

Now these Articles were designed and intended to exclude not only Deists, Socinians and Papists, but also Arians, Antinomians, Quakers and others. What I am asking is this: Cannot we accept those as the fundamentals? Are those not sufficient? We remember, of course, that bishops, deans, etc., etc., had been abolished at that time, and therefore did not need to be mentioned; and also that they did not have to contend with a 'higher critical' attitude to the Scriptures. They were agreed also in their attitude towards 'Tradition'. Their object was to define the irreducible minimum on which evangelical people could work together. We, today, need to elaborate some of these statements in view of our peculiar circumstances; but, still, I suggest, we should seek the minimum definition and not the maximum. Then, united on that basis, we can as brethren work together, and meet together for discussion of the matters on which we differ, and for our mutual edification.

