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## A NEW AND LARGER DOCTRINE OF INTENTION

### UNITY-IN-DIVERSITY

The ecumenism I want to see flourish is not one based on conformity or found in fitting someone else's pattern. It is a way of being Church which celebrates diversity and rejoices in what can be learned for our enrichment from people who think differently and act differently. It is a unity-in-diversity. The key-word of such unity is not agreement. It is acceptance. The struggle to find the right formula to which we can all give intellectual assent has caused the shipwreck of many an ecumenical venture and is as likely to be as sterile in the future as it has been in the past.

### BOUNDARIES

That is not to say that there are no boundaries. It is not to say that we can believe anything or that our theology is not important. We must get our picture of God right. It matters that we are talking about a God known through the Holy Spirit in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is the unity of Churches professing the God who is Three in One. We ought to be trying to agree about as much as possible. We are not absolved from wrestling with one another and with God, but the key to our coming together is none the less not "mental strife".

### ACCEPTANCE

The key to our unity is the ability to accept each other as sisters and brothers who together own the Lordship of Christ. "... if we cannot as yet think alike in all things, at least we may love alike," says John Wesley in his *Letter to a Roman Catholic*. To those who confess Jesus Christ as Lord we ought to be able to say in Wesley's catholic spirit: "Give me your hand, my friend." I want to say this to those who sit in our pews and I want to say it to those in positions of leadership, especially to those who claim to hold the keys of the Kingdom.

### A WAY FORWARD

Instead of picking at the same old sores, the leaders of the Churches might well give a lead, by working together at a NEW doctrine of intention. As it is currently expressed in the theology of the Catholic Church it relates to the way in which we understand what we are doing at the Lord's Supper. One of my eminent predecessors in the Chair of Liverpool, the Revd Reginald Kissack, tried, at the time of the Anglican-Methodist Conversations in the mid-sixties, to raise a discussion of the doctrine of intention *in relation to the eucharist and to ordination*. I believe that his instincts were right, although I would want to extend considerably the range of the doctrine. Traditionally its exponents have deployed a doctrine of intention to enable the Roman Catholic Church to attribute *a baptism of desire* to those whom they believe intend to do what the Roman Catholic Church intends to do. I know that the whole position is much more complicated and nuanced than that. I've had "seminars" with Archbishop Patrick Kelly of

Libverpool on this subject. But this bare statement is enough, I believe, to indicate the shift in thinking that is needed. Whilst I recognize the gesture of welcome being offered to those who want to be ecumenical limbo dancers and creep under the door I cannot really think that there is any ecumenical mileage whatsoever in any Church, taking a line which simply fits others into its own doctrine and invites them to come round to its way of thinking, a come-home-to-mum approach, - whether in relation to baptism, the Lord's Supper, episcopacy or any other doctrine - whether it be the Church of Rome talking to the Church of England or the Church of England talking to the Methodists. In spite of John Wesley's pronouncement to the Methodist Society in Dublin that "the original design of the Methodists was not to be a distinct party, but to stir up all parties, Christians or Heathens, to worship God in spirit and in truth, but the Church of England in particular..." I do not believe that there is really any mileage, as was suggested by a Liverpool friend and colleague in a Cathedral sermon, in proposing that the Methodist Church simply become what in the beginning it might have been, a religious order within the Church of England. There is no way back.

## **THE RIGHT HAND OF FELLOWSHIP**

There might though be considerable mileage in all Churches giving the right hand of fellowship to those whom we each recognize as *intending to do the will of God as revealed in Jesus Christ*. In those terms it is possible to take radically different approaches to how we worship and serve the One God known through our Lord Jesus Christ and yet recognize **the common intention that undergirds them all**. An ecumenism which in territorial terms is focused, for all of us, on Bethlehem, Nazareth and Jerusalem rather than on Canterbury, Rome and Constantinople might stand a better chance of commanding everyone's allegiance. Already within the Scriptures the perceived will of God is expressed in very diverse ways. If we can each say with integrity that we are seeking to do what Jesus intended, it might just be possible to find a new way forward, to forgive each other the hurts of the past and rejoice in an humble acceptance of difference, for truth is not a possession. As Ann Lewin has written:

“... Truth is both journey and  
Discovery, a Way which leads and  
Urges without rest.  
No castle for retreat but  
Camps where fellow pilgrims join  
To take refreshment in each other's  
Company.”

Truth is something for which we strive.

**I hope as Co-Chair of the Methodist/Anglican Covenant Talks in Britain to say a few words at the Oxford Institute, as time permits, about Intention in relation to the following areas, to show its relevance to the ecumenical scene in the UK.**

## **APPLICATIONS OF A NEW DOCTRINE OF INTENTION**

### **[a] INTENTION & WORSHIP**

### **[b] INTENTION & ORDINATION**

### **[c] INTENTION & THE CHRISTIAN LIFE [JOHN WESLEY & CHRISTIAN PERFECTION]**