

# CHANGE OF HEART

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ONE OF THE DANGERS of ecumenical conversation (if, for once, we may be permitted to avoid the overworked word 'dialogue' which in effect turns out too often to be a hope rather than a reality) is the danger of over-precision. The conversationalists are so keen to do justice to the distinctive emphases of their own tradition that instead of taking the form of a joint exploration, the conversation too soon becomes an explication of different, and firmly held, interpretations. The final result is that a certain amount of information concerning different traditions is exchanged, a few misunderstandings clarified, but there is no deepening of insight nor shift of basic attitude.

One can very easily imagine this happening in an ecumenical discussion of the basic christian concepts of 'conversion' and 'repentance'. Various usages of the biblical words *epistrepho* and *metanoeo* and their cognates would be examined and the seriousness of divergent interpretations would emerge. Repentance, or penitence or penance? This very word 'penance' would raise deeply-rooted suspicions for the protestant party. Conversion a process, a calling to the religious life or a single experience? It might be that roman catholics at this point would be highly dubious of the associations of deeply emotional, once-for-all 'conversion experiences' to which some protestants would want to point. Soon, critical and crucial differences would come to light. The following ungainly sentence from the english translation of the article on *metanoeo* in Kittel's famous *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* indicates the insuperable difficulties that fall to be overcome:

For as the call *metanoeite* which Jesus issued in the steps of John the Baptist is construed as an emotional appeal: 'Feel sorry', or as a stirring of the whole consciousness: 'Change your mind', or as a demand for acts of expiations for wrongs committed: 'Do penance', or as a summons to a radical change in the relation of God to man and man to God: 'Convert', 'be converted', so according to these various inter-

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pretations there will be radically different understandings of the message of Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

There can, of course, be no gainsaying of open discussion of radical differences. Honesty and faithfulness demand it, just as honesty and faithfulness demand the frank discussion of differences of opinion within any tradition. But if the aim of ecumenical discussion is as much the discovery of something new as the accurate elucidation of something old, then it may be that there is another way of proceeding, not so forthright, not so neat, but holding out the possibility of a shift of perspective to mutual advantage, and certainly avoiding an implicit conclusion that one side or the other is not christian after all. This method is the very simple one, often acknowledged but seldom tried, of concentrating on basic points of agreement, examining and developing their pre-suppositions in the hope that some degree of insight may emerge. Such a method will obviously not eliminate all differences: it may, however, shift the focus significantly and in a positive direction such that differences may be seen to be not quite so basic or crucial as otherwise.

If we apply this method to the area of meaning in which the two words 'conversion' and 'repentance' are traditionally used by christians, we can at least isolate two factors which would be generally agreed by all traditions, even if at first sight they do not appear to take us very far. These are (i) that a change of mind is necessarily involved and (ii) that conversion and the possibility of repentance are of God's gift. To each of them we now turn.

(i) *A change of mind is involved.* On any view, this must be true, which is no doubt why it sounds trite. William James, in *Varieties of Religious Experience*, offers on the basis of his massive researches a neutral definition of 'conversion' as 'the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self, hitherto divided, and consciously wrong, inferior and unhappy becomes unified and consciously right, superior and happy, in consequence of its former hold upon religious realities'.<sup>2</sup> Even in terms of this very general definition, a change of mind is involved and certainly this would be true of any christian teaching on conversion or repentance. It must, however, be swiftly added that it does not follow that, because a change of mind is involved, any change of mind qualifies for inclusion as a relevant factor.

<sup>1</sup> Kittel, G., (ed.) *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, english translation (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1967), Vol IV, p 1000.

<sup>2</sup> James, William, *Varieties of Religious Experience* (Fontana edition, 1960), p 194.

Plainly, there are many changes of mind which have nothing to do with conversion or repentance. It is therefore necessary to add that what christians are concerned with is 'a change of mind in the direction of Christ', that is, a change of mind following the acceptance, the apprehension or the reminder that what ultimately matters is God in Christ. But what are the pre-suppositions of a change of mind in the direction of Christ?

First, there is just this recognition of reality as God in Christ. What ultimately matters is not how much money we have, how much prestige we acquire, how much fun we have, how well our children get on: what ultimately matters is God as he has given himself to us in Christ and the opportunity he has given us to see ourselves as his agents, and all our fellow men and women as his children, our brothers and sisters, able to respond to reality in love. Such a view of reality is not individually worked out; it is individually accepted but it is communicated through the community which shares this perspective. This community, it may now safely be said without fear of contradiction, is not any one church but the people of God in all places and in all ages.

Secondly, it has to be recognized that acceptance of this view of reality guarantees neither perfect vision nor perfectly consistent conduct. There is no need here, surely, to enter into a discussion of 'sin', our proneness to shift our sights from what ultimately matters to some lesser good. It is enough to point out that a change of mind in the direction of Christ presupposes that we are able to recognise that our actions, ambitions, attitudes, even convictions, are not always consistent with our acknowledgment of what ultimately matters, of reality; that it is possible to admit this, to confess we have been and done wrong, to ask and receive forgiveness and to change. The other and more positive side to this is the presupposition of openness to opportunities which have not presented themselves as live options before, openness to new ways of expressing old insights and making them more effective, openness to the changing 'forms of love', if we may put it that way, in our world.

Thirdly, it has to be pointed out that a change of mind concerning what ultimately matters, or concerning conduct or attitude consistent with what ultimately matters, is something much more complex than a mere decision to act rationally. This needs stressing because minds are not changed, at least in the direction of Christ, by appeals to commonsense or straight thinking. If it were otherwise, it would at least in theory be possible by searching, for example, to 'find out

God';<sup>1</sup> if it were otherwise, then all that would be needed to escape from the pauline dilemma – 'The good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do'<sup>2</sup> – would be a high intelligence quotient. But simple experience tells us this is just not so: our powers of rationalization are much too subtle and too strong for that, enabling us to back up the most unreasonable attitudes with apparently rational arguments which satisfy ourselves, if no one else.

All sorts of non-rational factors may be involved. Subconscious motivations and drives can no longer be left out of account. The influence of another and powerful personality is frequently decisive in helping someone to change his mind. Or the existence or absence of an atmosphere of openness, trust and mutual concern may be the decisive thing. It was presumably the existence of such an atmosphere which enabled the bishops at the first session of the second Vatican Council to give serious attention to some unfamiliar and not infrequently alien views, and so to launch a programme of renewal throughout the entire christian world which has not yet been exhausted. No doubt there are many additional factors which could be mentioned. Enough simply to note the point that a change of mind on something that really matters is the most difficult of exercises, and that many forces apart from the intellect are at work in it. It presupposes many other things, not least of which is what, for want of a better term, we might call 'change of heart'.

A change of mind, then, about something that matters ultimately is no easy matter. Indeed, it is the most difficult of exercises, because of the implication of previous fault or error. This consideration naturally brings us to the second factor in 'conversion' and 'repentance'.

(ii) *Conversion and the possibility of repentance are of God's gift.* This is not to say that there is anything impersonal, mechanical or alien which forces men and women, like puppets, from time to time to 'turn again' and 'repent'. But it does mean that the event and process we are concerned with are made possible by God alone. This does seem to be the only possible interpretation of the wealth of biblical data which refers to repentance as the gift of the Spirit,<sup>3</sup> and to a 'change of heart' as something to be granted by the Lord.<sup>4</sup>

This point may be put in another and simpler way by asking the question: What, according to the New Testament evidence, are the signs of the working of the Spirit? The answer would have to be that

<sup>1</sup> Cf Job 11, 7.

<sup>2</sup> Rom 7, 19.

<sup>3</sup> E.g. Acts 10, 45; 11, 18.

<sup>4</sup> 2 Tim 2, 25.

at least one of the signs of the holy Spirit is when men and women change their minds for Christ. This would certainly be true of the dramatic, once-for-all 'conversion' of individuals and groups, their acceptance of God in Christ as the ultimate reality. One need hardly cite the conversion of Paul, the pentecostal narrative,<sup>1</sup> the story of the gentiles of Cornelius' household.<sup>2</sup> Illustrations could be multiplied. But what is sometimes forgotten is that this is also true of individual decisions which christians are called upon to make.

For example, the way the Book of Acts records the extension of the gospel from the jews to the gentiles is highly revealing in this context.<sup>3</sup> Peter appears to have earned the disfavour of the headquarters of the christian Church in Jerusalem. The charge against him was not that he had preached to the gentiles; but rather that he, a jew, had deigned to accept the hospitality of gentiles, eating with them and treating them in every respect on a par with jews. To the jewish christians in Jerusalem, under pressure as they were from orthodox jews, this must have seemed both treacherous and heretical, putting the whole christian cause in jeopardy. Peter's defence was a simple recital of the facts: his vision; 'What God had cleansed, you must not call common'; gentiles had come asking his help, and, true to his recent conviction but in defiance of all that he had been brought up as a jew to believe, he had accepted their hospitality and treated them as 'clean'; when he had preached to them he found they were as capable of hearing and accepting the gospel as the first jewish converts had been; consequently he had had no option but to baptize them. 'Who was I that I could withstand God?' Such was the substance of his defence, and at this point the narrative is deceptively brief. 'When they' (the christian leaders) 'heard this they were silenced. And they glorified God, saying, "Then to the gentiles also God has granted repentance unto life".' It must, however, be legitimate to read between the lines here and imagine the heart-searchings, the doubts, the recriminations which lay behind this quite momentous decision, this change of mind, against all reasonable expectation and with no guarantee, in the direction of Christ, under the guidance of the holy Spirit.

God, then, comes to our aid not only in enabling us to 'turn' to Christ as the ultimate reality of our lives, but to keep 'turning' or 'changing' so as to live more responsibly, more consistently with reality. This latter process is described in different ways in different

<sup>1</sup> Acts 2.

<sup>2</sup> Acts 10, especially vv 44-45.

<sup>3</sup> Acts 11, 1-8.

traditions. It could rightly be described as being ever open to a more appropriate response of love to the love of God offered once for all in Christ. In the presbyterian tradition, it used to be described in a quaint and unusual way as 'improving our baptism', and it is worth quoting the Westminster Larger Catechism of 1648:

The needful but much neglected duty of improving our baptism is to be performed by us all our life long, especially in time of temptation . . . by serious and thankful consideration of the nature of it, and of the ends for which Christ instituted it, the privileges and benefits conferred and sealed thereby, and our solemn vows made therein; by being humbled for our sinful defilement, our falling short of, and walking contrary, to, the grace of baptism, and our engagements; by growing up to assurance and pardon of sin, and of all the blessings sealed to us in that sacrament; by drawing strength from the death and resurrection of Christ, into whom we are baptized, for mortifying of sin, and quickening of grace; and by endeavouring to live by faith, to have our conversation in holiness and righteousness, as those that have therein given up their names to Christ; and to walk in brotherly love, as being baptized by the same Spirit into one body.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the archaic language and certain emphases which may be unfamiliar, it is easy to read behind this passage the serious recognition that, for the christian life, constant openness to change is indispensable.

Having examined some of the simple but basic undisputed elements of 'conversion' and 'repentance', we are now in a position to examine how these work out in an ecumenical setting; what, in particular, their implications are for ecumenical discussion and work.

Clearly, the first thing to recognise is that the immediate object of ecumenical discussion is just to achieve a change of mind. All too often, this is forgotten in the aura of goodwill that is certainly the pre-condition of any useful discussion. Equally, in ecumenical conversations it is too easily forgotten that there are more than two possible changes that can come about. The two possibilities that are always implicitly acknowledged are that party (denomination) A

<sup>1</sup> Answer to question 167: 'How is our baptism to be improved by us?'

should abandon his position and adopt the position of party (denomination) B, or that party B should abandon his position and adopt the position of party A. But there is an often ignored third possibility: that parties A and B find a new way of expressing their positions which is acceptable to both but which retains what has previously been of essential importance. If this third possibility is to be seriously accepted, it means that not one or the other but both parties have to change their minds. What usually prevents this happening is that both parties feel duty-bound to adopt a highly 'orthodox' position, proving to the other party (but really persuading themselves) how loyal they are to their own tradition. This succeeds only in obscuring the basic points of agreement, confirming suspicions and evoking dangerous associations.

A more positive result demands more honesty and more imagination. It demands more honesty, first, with oneself, to admit the things that are of crucial importance to one now and the things that are not, however important these latter may have been in the historical past of one's own tradition. Secondly, more honesty is demanded in the presence of one's ecumenical partner concerning the differences of opinion and interpretation that exist within one's own tradition. It is tragic how easily inter-confessional discussion succeeds in glossing over intra-confessional differences. For the truth is that the admission of such differences, far from reducing that tradition to contempt in the eyes of another, actually enhances it. If a personal reference be allowed, my own interest and respect for traditional roman catholic teaching on points which my own tradition would dispute has been immensely increased – simply because I have had the privilege of hearing roman catholic bishops and theologians at the second Vatican Council heatedly contesting each other's interpretations on points which previously I had thought allowed of one interpretation only (e.g. infallibility; the relation between scripture and tradition).

But more imagination in ecumenical discussion is necessary, because a change of mind is necessary. Goodwill, patience, and the polite repetition of war-worn formulae and objections are not enough. What is needed is the kind of effort of imagination which is necessary to put one-self in some-one else's shoes; to put one's convictions into a new language, preferably the kind of language one's ecumenical partner is accustomed to using and which gets away from the old hostile associations. Only in this way is there any hope of being really understood, let alone agreed with. Only in this way

can one begin to glimpse why objections to doctrine which seemed so unreasonable before really do carry weight with our partner. Only in this way do we begin to understand precisely why our convictions really matter to ourselves, and discover that it may be possible to express them in a different way.

Reference was made in the discussion of 'change of mind' to the non-intellectual factors involved. Now it must be shewn how decisive these are in ecumenical discussion. Here it must be said, generally, that no progress is to be expected unless the psychological atmosphere is favourable. That is to say, an atmosphere of mutual trust, expectation, hope and humility is essential, an atmosphere in which it is possible for people to say things they have never thought of saying before, without either making fools of themselves or letting the side down. Some may say that to expect such an atmosphere is altogether unrealistic, a counsel of perfection which can only confuse issues that are complicated enough already. This charge would be justified if the context is one of mutual criticism/agreement of traditional doctrines and practice. Indeed, it must be admitted that just this context is the one in which so many of our 'conversations' are set, which makes them so tediously repetitive and unproductive. But it is not unrealistic if such an atmosphere is seen as the end-product of a longer or shorter process of mutual friendship, of gradual growth in trust, in which it becomes possible to expose one's most serious certainties and most secret doubts without fear of betrayal. It is not unrealistic if attention is focussed not so much on traditional differences as on present conviction of what matters most, on present appreciation of the christian task in the modern world.

Serious consideration of the christian task and place in the modern world could be a great unifying force among christians of different denominations. For once christians start looking together at reality, at what matters most, they can discover a unity of purpose, of existence and of opportunity which is far more constructive than any mere intellectual synthesizing of traditional disagreements. There is much talk these days about the 'pain of disunity', some of which does less than justice to the seriousness of the situation. For, too frequently, the impression is given that if only christians of different traditions could worship together and especially receive communion together, the pain would vanish. But this attitude makes a dangerously irresponsible isolation of worship from work and the world, of religion from life. In fact, the real pain of disunity must find its centre



in the lost opportunities of joint openness to reality now, in the less than whole-hearted investigations into the kind of response in love to the reality of love which is being offered today.

Finally, as we saw that a change of mind or heart in the direction of Christ was of God's gift, so it must now be recognised that this also applies in ecumenical relations. It is commonly said that the ecumenical task is not to work for unity but to uncover and make visible the unity we already have in Christ. This is undoubtedly correct. But what is often overlooked is that even this uncovering and making visible of our given unity is not an end in itself, is not to be sought after for its own sake. For it is a God-given by-product of something else, something which we have referred to as response, a total undivided response to the reality of God in Christ. Indeed, the dominical prayer for unity is not that christians should be united for the sake of unity, but 'that the world may believe that thou hast sent me'.<sup>1</sup>

That unity is to be looked for as a by-product of common concern is something exciting which many groups of christians are in fact discovering for themselves. As they jointly engage themselves in the challenges of the world – I am thinking, for example, of those working to provide and run some community facilities for disgruntled and dispossessed teenagers; or working for improved housing; or tackling realistically the human problems of an automated society – they are discovering both their essential unity and the offensiveness of ecclesiastical disunity. Such a discovery would have been quite out of the question if these same people had been meeting once a week for years simply to discuss problems of Church disunity.

The moral is surely not that strictly theological factors are unimportant. This would be naive, indeed patently false. But the moral is that theological factors come in legitimately only when they are rooted in the tasks of the present and oriented to the opportunities of now; only when the presupposition of their discussion is an openness in the present to change of heart and mind – in the direction of Christ. Certainly, without such openness, no-one and no Church has the right to claim the assistance of the holy Spirit – nor to ask for his aid.

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<sup>1</sup> Jn 17, 21.