

Chapter 1

The Importance of Being United

The outward reasons why the Christian Church has wanted to be united have changed over the centuries. The deeper reasons have had the same inner coherence in every century. At the beginning it was essential for Christianity to make itself distinct from Judaism and from contemporary polytheistic pagan religions. As the young Church grew in numbers and evolved a more complex structure, there were also practical problems to do with keeping control over change and development, so that the Christian faith would not fragment into a thousand different forms.

These were considerations about the community. For many Christians in the modern Western world the relationship of the individual soul with God seems all-important. But this is a comparatively recent emphasis. It was brought to the forefront of believers' minds by the debates of the sixteenth century and after in the West, which created the churches of the Reformation. First there were moves away from the insistence on the universality or catholicity of the Church. Many Reformation leaders rejected the 'visible' universal Church of the day as corrupted by Antichrist and claimed

that the true Church was invisible and known only to God. Others pointed to a visible church of their own adherents as the true Church.

Then there was a diminution of the sense of community. Pietism and the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century encouraged the faithful to believe that what mattered was personal commitment rather than (and not as well as) membership of the community of a 'visible' universal Church.

The early Christian picture was quite different. Christians, following Christ's command, left their fathers and their mothers and went out to preach the Gospel. They won disciples. The stress was on the building up of a 'community' of followers of Christ, the body of which he was the Head. This is the Church (with a capital C) in the sense in which the term is mainly used in this book. With a small 'c', 'church' is used here for the local community or sometimes the divided community, for something which is not that complete single *koinonia* (the New Testament term for 'community' in the particular form it took in the Church). It became obvious early on that the human reality did not always match the ideal, and that even in individual localities the churches were internally divided. But that did not diminish the importance of the ideal of unity.

'Being one' in this way was a strong theme in Christianity from the beginning. 'Though we are many, we are one body in union with Christ, and we are all joined to each other as different parts of one body' (Romans 12.5). On this understanding that it is a religion of 'community', Christianity makes sense only if it expresses itself in unity, and at the beginning it was natural to see this as a 'visible' unity. By baptism Christians become members of this 'body' which 'is the Church'. St Paul emphasizes that this is 'one

baptism', by which 'Christians have been baptized into the one body' (1 Corinthians 12.13).

One central reason why has it been regarded as so important in the history of Christianity that there should be 'one faith' is that the faith in question was 'faith in Christ', an expression of this 'unity with Christ himself'. He himself underlined the point and made it central at the Last Supper he ate with his disciples before he was crucified. He took bread and said 'This is my body', before breaking it and sharing it with his disciples. 'The bread we break, when we eat it, we are sharing in the body of Christ', said Paul in his first letter to the Christians at Corinth (1 Corinthians 10.17). That is why the Eucharist he instituted is also known as Holy Communion.

The context of worship is important. The early Christian community met in worship. Its members prayed to Jesus as Lord, as no Jewish community could do. The Jews insisted that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was one God and unless Jesus was clearly understood to be himself God they could not call Jesus 'Lord' in worship. To baptize in the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit required explanation and clarification. That explanation and others like it, particularly about the relationship of this Jesus to humanity, had to be forthcoming again and again as the first Christians spread the Gospel among Jews and those of other religions. So liturgical and missionary contexts actively helped to shape the understanding of the faith and to set the main parameters of its orthodoxy.

The expectation was strong at the beginning that very soon the community of Jesus's disciples would be with him in heaven, enjoying for eternity a 'communion' or 'fellowship' (*koinonia*) of the perfect love of God and love of one's neighbour (Mark 12.31). This urgent sense of the importance

of keeping the flock together and ready has manifested itself afresh repeatedly throughout Christian history, whenever – as has happened again and again – there have been fears that the end of the world was imminent.

In such heightened periods of anxiety, it has been easy to see heresy and schism as having a cosmic significance, as part of a Satanic plot against God. Filastrius, author of the *acta* of the Council of Aquileia in 381, wrote a *Book on Divers Heresies*, in which he places the origin of the plague (*pestilentia*) of these heresies in the events at the beginning of the world, when Adam sinned, and he blames first the Jews for its diffusion, and later the idolatry of Christians.¹

But at a much more workaday level there have emerged repeating patterns of dissident and divisive opinion. Schleiermacher, in the nineteenth century, saw heresy as that which defines human nature or Christ as the redeemer in such a way that redemption cannot be accomplished.² He thought that by his own time the repeating patterns could no longer easily be reduced to a simple alternative, an antithesis of Catholic and heretical: ‘We must rather start from the essence of Christianity, and seek to construe the heretical in its manifold forms by asking in how many different ways the essence of Christianity can be contradicted, and the appearance of Christianity yet remain’.³ He breaks down the patterns into broad types, many of which will be recognizable in the story which is told in this book. Schleiermacher’s idea was that some (for example, the Docetists) have gone ‘astray’ by seeing Christ as a pretence, not really human and so not bringing about a ‘real’ redemption; others have made the mistake of seeing Christ as a mere example, to be imitated, which has removed his power to redeem; others, such as the Manichees and other dualists, have seen humanity as fundamentally tainted by evil from

its very creation; a fourth group (the Pelagians and their like) have made the opposite mistake of considering humanity to be essentially good and therefore capable of perfecting itself by effort.⁴ This reading is not necessarily in tune with all the stories to be found here, but it is a useful starting-point for the exercise of trying to see the underlying tendencies away from a balanced and consensual faith which have run away with individuals and groups of believers in certain directions again and again over the centuries.

Forming Consensus

In a Christian Church conceived from the beginning as a community bound by a shared faith and a shared personal commitment to Christ, how have some believers disagreed with the mainstream views about the faith or found themselves separated from the rest of the community?

The reality has usually been that there was no intention of separateness at the start. Someone has raised a question, often a question no one had thought of before. The early centuries of Christianity opened up a great many such questions in the ordinary course of people's attempts to live a 'Christian' life in imitation of Christ. As they set about following Christ's commandments daily decisions had to be made. Those who were Jews were accustomed to rules about not eating 'unclean' foods. Did those still apply? Were Christians still bound to obey all the other laws of the Old Testament? Was it necessary to be circumcised as well as baptized? Several such questions can be seen causing divisiveness in the Acts of the Apostles. Some of those who were preaching the Christian faith taught converts that they

had to be circumcised in the traditional Jewish way if they were to become Christians. Others said that was completely unnecessary, for Christians were not bound by the old law.

These were questions which were not easily resolved, and which were to reappear over the centuries in groups whose opinions were episodically condemned by the Church. One way to understand the complex phenomenon of 'heresy' is to explore in this way how a particular idea or preoccupation resurfaces. For example, the 'Passagians' believed in literal obedience to the Law of the Old Testament. The Passagians were said to rely on the authority of the Lord speaking in Matthew: 'do not think that I am come to destroy the Law or the prophets. I am not come to destroy but to fulfil' (Matthew 5.17). There follows a series of further texts from Scripture, from each of which is drawn the conclusion, 'for this reason all things that are included in the law are to be observed'. These observances included requiring circumcision, strict Sabbath observance, strict observance of Old Testament dietary laws, but not 'ecclesiastical institutions which the heretics seek to annul entirely, calling them superfluous'.⁵ The Passagians were condemned by the Pope in 1184 and there is no evidence that they survived long after his formal disapproval was made official, or that they were very widespread. Nevertheless their leading ideas were bound to be a continuing concern when it had not proved easy for the early Church to settle this question either.

One of the ramifications of this continuing debate about the place of the commandments of the Old Law in the new Christian dispensation is picked up by John Wyclif.⁶ Does Scripture teach that it is necessary to obey the law in order to be saved, he asks? Recent heretics, claimed Wyclif, say that no one can obey the law perfectly, and if that is so,

none can be saved. That must mean that there is no need to obey the law. This rather startling inference was intended to test the waters. Wyclif himself believed that there *is* an obligation on Christians to obey God's law, and that it is possible for everyone God intends to save to do so.⁷

This is even made into an argument in favour of the provision of vernacular versions of the texts in which the law is written, for everyone will need to know what the law is.⁸ Some contemporaries insisted that it was necessary for at least the Ten Commandments to be available in English as well as in Latin. There had been some 'progress' on this front in the provision of manuals for the less well-educated clergy to use. Archbishop Pecham had held a Provincial Council at Lambeth in 1281 at which a plan of 'instruction for the laity' was drawn up. In 1425 it was translated into English at the instigation of the Bishop of Bath and Wells, who had it put in every church in the diocese.

Another leading late mediaeval dissident, Jan Hus (c.1369–1415), argues that, 'with reference to the *ceremonialia*', or ceremonial ritual duties laid on the Jewish people, the Old Law is buried by the New, so that as Augustine says, if anyone submitted to circumcision in the Jewish way he would be counted a heretic. Nevertheless, the parts of the Old Testament which contain the *ceremonialia* are not to be burned.⁹ This line of argument seems to place Hus outside the 'fundamentalist' stream. It is not his position that everything in the Bible must be taken as it stands. He sees the Bible as a whole, in which the New Testament alters for the Christian some of what is taught in the Old. Nevertheless, he is clearly still preoccupied with these questions which were dividing the first Christians.

The young Church had tried to deal with this evidently important practical question by meeting in a prototype of

what was eventually to become a 'Council' of the Church and seeking consensus. They then agreed to write an explanatory letter (Acts 15.23–9), which could be read aloud in churches. This said that Christians did not need to feel burdened with the obligation to keep the whole of the Old Law; they need observe only a few basic rules. They should not eat meat which had been offered to idols and they should keep clear of sexual immorality.

This policy of seeking consensus was not as straightforward as it looked, because in the enlarging Church, it soon began to raise the question of the authority of such collective decisions. A small local meeting might have every local Christian present and joining in the discussion. But if the local churches were to succeed in maintaining a common faith it was necessary to devise a formal structure to enable their leaders to meet and settle disagreements on their behalf. That meant deciding who the leaders were and what kind of leaders they were to be and whether they could 'bind' those who had chosen them, when they met as their representatives. And that raises the vexed question of 'ministry' which will be visible everywhere in this book as a cause of division.

In the history of the Church there has been a series of 'conciliar' pronouncements, or statements of official gatherings of the Church in the persons of its representatives, made on the understanding that when Christians gathered together in that way the Holy Spirit was also present and they could be sure of having divine guidance in reaching their conclusions. The same careful work in trying to establish continuity with the faith of the first Christians has had to be done again and again, as the old questions arose afresh in each generation. The first of these to attempt a comprehensive statement of faith or Creed was the Council

of Nicaea in 325. A revised version of the Nicene Creed was agreed by the Council of Constantinople in 381.

At the Council of Chalcedon in 451 a definition of the faith was agreed. In sending it out, the assembled bishops took as a starting-point the words of Jesus: 'My peace I give you, my peace I leave to you' (John 14.27). They explained that 'the evil one never stops trying to smother the seeds of religion with his own tares and is for ever inventing some novelty or other against the truth', so Christ has prompted the calling together of a Council of the leaders of the Church. They were reassuring that the Council has 'driven off erroneous doctrines' by its 'collective resolution', and it has 'renewed the unerring creed of the Fathers'. It has done this, they said, by reaffirming the Creed of the Council of Nicaea in 325 and that of the Council of Constantinople in 381, which was, in its turn a reaffirmation and refinement of the Nicene Creed.¹⁰ They went on to list the heretical ideas their restatement of the creed outlaws and to insist that 'since we have formulated these things with all possible accuracy and attention . . . no one is permitted to produce, or even to write down or compose, any other creed or to think of teach otherwise'. Anyone who attempted it was to be deposed if a cleric or anathematized if a lay person.¹¹ This was a comprehensive enough attempt to fortify the Church against a recurrence of these difficulties.

Yet conciliar statements have not always been the 'last word'. The *consensus fidelium*, the gradually emerging informal 'agreement' or 'sense' of the whole 'people of God', has sometimes led to revisions of opinion over time. In the sixteenth century, the Council of Trent (1545–63) insisted on keeping the Latin Vulgate and banning the use of vernacular versions of the Bible. By the middle of the twentieth

century, in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council there had been a reversal. Priests who wanted to go on using Latin were being condemned by a Church which would formerly have regarded them as loyal to its teaching. So it is not easy with hindsight to identify some positions confidently as 'orthodox', conforming in their thinking with the settled view of the continuing Christian community, and others as 'divergent', or 'unorthodox'. And the reappearance of unresolved questions about the need to obey the Old Law shows how hard some questions were to settle.

The Papacy

Alongside the evolution of a balance between 'official' or 'conciliar' pronouncements and the emergence of the 'consensus of the faithful' have run other ways of finding out what to believe when in doubt. One of the most important of these in the West has been the rise of the papacy as a source of definitive pronouncements. Christianity began in the period when Rome dominated the local world. It began to mature as a religion in a Roman Empire entering its decline. After the fall of Rome a vestige of Empire was recreated in the form of the 'Holy Roman Empire'. This was set up when Charlemagne was crowned in 800. It assumed that there was to be a continuing relationship between Emperor and Pope, although the maintenance of a balance of power was to prove a crucial difficulty. For a large part of the Middle Ages it was believed that the first Christian Emperor Constantine had made a 'Donation' to Pope Hadrian, conceding supremacy to the spiritual power. That this was a Carolingian forgery, an invented document created about the eighth century, did not become apparent

for many centuries. (Spotting forgeries was never easy in the Middle Ages, if a document claimed to come from an ancient authority.)

In the time of Pope Gregory the Great (c.540–604), there was already significant rivalry between the heads of the ancient patriarchates of Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria, Constantinople and Rome over which should be primate, with Rome claiming supremacy because it was the see of Peter. For had not Christ called Peter the rock on whom he would found his Church (Matthew 16.18). The Eastern Patriarchs not only resented this claim to predominance; they also objected to the very idea of a universal primacy. The Eastern custom was to regard the patriarchates as autocephalous, which meant that they were bound to keep the same faith, but free to run their own affairs under their separate ‘heads’.

In the late eleventh century Pope Gregory VII (1073–85) began to press for an enlargement of the papal claims to plenitude of power in the West, and for recognition of the supremacy of Church over state in the West. The role of the papacy now began to be an important element in this story of the processes by which the continuity of the faith was maintained and ‘orthodoxy’ defined. That led to several centuries of power struggles between Church and state, but it also encouraged an aggrandizement of papal claims to power within the Western Church itself (and indeed in the Church as a whole, since the Bishop of Rome continued to seek to be recognized as universal primate). Bernard of Clairvaux summarized the position in his book *On Consideration*, written as a manual of advice for Pope Eugenius III (d.1153). He explained that the Pope is supreme over all powers on earth, and subject only to the authority of heaven.

From this point, popes increasingly began to behave like monarchs of the Church, with consequent diminution of the authority accorded to the Council of Bishops. These internal tensions, and the corruptions perhaps inevitably consequent upon allowing the papacy to make this bid for personal power, were the cause of much of the disaffection we shall find among the 'anti-establishment' dissidents discussed in this book. They also pointed down the road to Reformation.

With the invention of printing, the appearance of the polemical reforming literature of the sixteenth century presented a new problem. This was no occasional treatise, but a barrage of informed challenge. A Luther or a Calvin could have an immense influence when books could be so widely copied and distributed. In the 1550s local tribunals of the Holy Office were already making lists of works which Catholics were forbidden to read. Pope Paul IV published an Index of Prohibited Books in 1559. The Index banned the works of Luther and those of earlier dissidents such as Jan Hus. It also forbade the reading of the work of humanists like Erasmus of Rotterdam. There were less controversial bannings; the Church had always disapproved of writings on magic and it was not new for the Church to disapprove of writings tending to encourage immorality. But this systematic listing of books for banning was without precedent. The Council of Trent approved the Index in 1564 and in 1571 the next Pope, Pius V, a former Grand Inquisitor, created a special 'Congregation of the Index'. The Congregation of the Index remained in existence until 1917 and the last edition of the Index appeared in 1948.

This was the negative side of a developing positive doctrine of the *magisterium* or teaching office of the Church. At the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 the Church was described

as *mater et magistra*, not only Mother but Teacher. This was a strong version of the ancient idea that the leaders of the community would meet from time to time to discuss questions arising about the definition of the faith. In the West it was increasingly understood that the Pope occupied a special place in the teaching structure; Papal infallibility was gradually accepted, although it did not receive formal definition until 1870. Then the First Vatican Council decreed that papal pronouncements made *ex cathedra* on matters of faith and morals were infallible, even if no Council approved them. That was the far end of one road by which the faith was, in intention, kept whole and unchanged.

The Bible in the Hands of Heretics

It is high time to look at the place of the Bible in this story. When a question is asked which seems to be challenging received opinion it is convenient to turn to written authority for answers. The most important written source in Christian history has been the Bible. Historically, Scripture's authority cannot easily be separated from that of the Church; for the Bible was itself a product of the early Church. The idea of a 'canon' of Scriptures accepted as possessing special authority is to be found in Old Testament times. By the middle of the second century the four Gospels and the 13 epistles of Paul had emerged from a literature which included other 'gospels' and letters. Between the end of the second century and the first decades of the third century these came to have the same sort of standing and weight as the Old Testament. There was some local variation. Some churches accepted writings such as the *Shepherd of Hermas* and the *Epistle of Barnabas*. Gradually, other books now in the New

Testament 'canon' won acceptance, although doubts hung over Hebrews, Revelation and some of the non-Pauline epistles into the late third or fourth centuries. It is not until the time of Athanasius (369) that the present 'canon' appears complete. This process of 'acceptance' is hard to trace and it is still much disputed exactly how the list was arrived at. It was, however, given 'official' approvals which can be pointed to with more confidence. For instance, in 382 a Council at Rome gave a list of more or less the modern contents of Scripture (including a small group of books from the Old Testament period now known as the Apocrypha, which have not been accepted by many Protestant churches). So it was the Church which 'filtered' and decided upon the inclusion of the various elements in the early Christian Scriptures which eventually made up the Bible.

It was accepted quite early that the books of Holy Scripture were divinely inspired and therefore of supreme authority. Jerome (c.342–420), making the fresh translation into Latin which came to be known as the Vulgate, raised the question whether his translation itself was to be regarded as inspired. He did not think it was. He made a clear distinction between what he was doing, and the 'direct dictation' of the Holy Spirit which was generally seen as the privilege of the Evangelists and the divine inspiration which the Prophets were believed to have enjoyed. This distinction became very blurred as the Vulgate was read and discussed century by century, for it was difficult not to treat the Latin text as 'real' Scripture, when it was the only text available to most scholars.

The difficulties of ensuring that the 'interpretation' of Scripture did not lead readers 'away' from its message did not grow less with the centuries. We shall meet them

everywhere in this book. The Pope, writing to the Masters of the University of Oxford in the fourteenth century about the problem of Wyclif, flattered them on their ‘familiarity with the Scriptures, in whose sea you navigate, by the gifts of God, with an auspicious oar’, for Wyclif’s own interpretations were feared to be leading the faithful astray.¹²

The saving power of the Bible ought, in the view of the mediaeval Church, to be mediated through its teaching authority by its ordained and therefore authorized ministers, with the approval of the local bishop. It is for priests to decide religious questions, says Bernard of Fontcaud.¹³ He pointed out that Moses said to the elders of Israel when he went up alone to speak with God, ‘Wait here until I return to you. You have Aaron and Hur with you. If any question arises, refer it to them’ (Exodus 24.14). Bernard says that it is not proper for the laity to preach. They do not have the authority; they may lead the faithful astray. He is clear that women cannot preach.¹⁴

But that is not so ‘safe’ a teaching if the Church’s authorized ministers have gone astray, or fail to do their duty as teachers. Wyclif speaks strongly about the neglect of the duty to preach on Scripture by the clergy and religious of his day. ‘The false brothers and dumb priests ought to be ashamed to omit to defend the Law of God’. Their failure to do so brings ruin to the faithful.¹⁵ As one author puts it in the thirteenth century, ‘The clergy of the Roman Church, on whose behalf you speak, are perverse and live against God and when they speak of God their speech is blasphemy’.¹⁶ The ecclesiastical authorities, once ‘proved’ fallible, cannot be relied upon as interpreters of Scripture.

When popular heretics tried to understand the Bible for themselves and even presumed to interpret it for others by preaching, they were implicitly challenging the assumption

that the Church was the vessel of salvation and its approved teaching the only safe way for the believer to follow.

By the early thirteenth century, this question of the 'right way to use the Bible' was a prominent topic of debate. The twelfth century had seen the creation of a standard gloss or commentary, the *Glossa Ordinaria*, put together as a complex patchwork by scholars drawing on the commentaries of the Fathers and filling in the gaps. Uneducated or half-educated self-appointed preachers were ignoring all this work and setting themselves up as independent commentators. It was bound to seem a challenge to the Church. Heretics, far from being brought to salvation by the Word of God, are led to their perdition by even the texts of Scripture when they interpret them perversely, says the thirteenth-century apologist Durandus of Huesca in his book *Against the Manichees*, which he wrote with the zeal of a convert as a former Waldensian heretic turned Catholic.¹⁷ He explains that it is not of course the sacred text itself, but the construction placed upon it, which does the spiritual harm.¹⁸

Wyclif's *On the Church* (1378) sets forth a revolutionary doctrine of the Church. The rejection of the visible Church of the day as authoritative in its teaching and ministry encourages him to take 'Scripture alone' to be the locus and source of all authority. He is assuming that legislation promulgated by popes is 'mannis law', that is, a merely 'human' law which does not have divine sanction. Wyclif thus began to question with remorseless persistence the rightful authority of a Church which seemed to be setting itself against the principles Jesus laid down for his disciples and whose ordained ministry – the 'authorized' officers – were frequently unworthy. It is not in dispute that there was widespread disquiet on this point. The very twelfth-century and early thirteenth-century councils we saw condemning

heretics also made extensive comment on the unacceptable behaviour of many of the clergy. The 'unworthy minister' question had been resolved in the patristic period in favour of an acceptance that divine grace can work through even the most corrupt of ministers. Augustine explained that the unworthiness of a minister did not invalidate what he did, provided he was acting and teaching in the true faith. There were exceptions. The Donatists of north Africa in the time of Augustine were not persuaded that it was possible to accept ministers whose ordination they thought invalid because it had at some stage in the chain involved the laying on of hands by ministers who had abandoned the faith under persecution and returned to it. But for the most part this confidence that divine grace works regardless even through unworthy ministers, had been a more or less settled question. But it was becoming difficult not to return to it in the face of widespread outrage about the excesses of some of the higher clergy in the high Middle Ages and their neglect of their real duties.

Wyclif writes that no one can hold true 'dominion' over others, or over possessions, while in a state of mortal sin. He says that some think that if a priest leads an evil life, that may take from him the power to administer the sacraments.¹⁹ Wycliffites wanted to see ministers chosen according to God's law and not at the behest of princes or for money.²⁰ The wrong people, chosen for the wrong reasons, may be subject to avarice and worldly love, given to simony and, above all, eager for power.²¹

While defect in an unworthy minister might be supplied by grace with reference to his sacramental functions, it did not follow, to the thinking of many of the dissident groups, that a corrupt priest could be an adequate minister of the Word. Wyclif, like the Waldensians, saw ministry as an office

in which the ministry of the Word is the most important thing. The minister is the vicar of Christ in that he feeds the people with the Word which is Christ. So the preaching office is primary.

Wyclif gives a further definition of heresy in his *De fundatione sectarum*, which contains another shift that is important for our purposes. He tries to make 'spirit-led exegesis' the norm: 'Anyone who pertinaciously expounds the faith of Scripture other than as the Holy Spirit directs, is a heretic'.²² He touches here on a theme which was to prove important in the Reformation debates. Once the *magisterium* of the Church is denied, it is necessary to identify an authority which can keep the private reader of Scripture on the right path. Anything else is mere personal opinion. Wyclif explains (speaking for himself) that:

as far as those parts of Scripture are concerned of whose meaning we have a [mere] opinion or are humbly uncertain, we regard our sense as held *opinative* and we are always prepared to concede the 'catholic meaning', whether it is expressed by the Pope or by some friar or by a lay person or by a learned man'.²³

But where Scripture seems to him to give a clear lead, Wyclif will not submit to the Church's teaching.

In his *On the Truth of Holy Scripture*²⁴ Wyclif regards the Bible as the repository of all truth and as inerrant. He urges Christians 'to believe steadily in the faith of Scripture, and not to believe any other source on any subject unless what it says is based on Scripture'.²⁵ Wyclif was not hostile to the Church of earlier times. In fact, it is one of his objections to the sects that they expound the Scripture in ways which have no precedent in the Fathers.²⁶

Heretics who thought like this were separating the Bible and the Church, and taking the Bible to be the only safe and sufficient guide. Scripture is its own illumination.²⁷ 'That opinion of the Apostle is clear and needs no exposition'.²⁸ Surviving poems reflect the same idea: 'But Scripture says, and it is quite clear'.²⁹ This theory of 'self-evidency' implicitly assumes that the faithful, reading the Bible for themselves, will have the guidance of the Holy Spirit to ensure that they do not go astray, for it is the Spirit which makes its meaning 'clear'. The preface to Wyclif's collected sermons on the Sunday Gospels sets out the principles,³⁰ that God's teaching may be clearer and he himself as preacher may be of use as God's servant.

Towards the end of his life, Wyclif came close to embracing the doctrine of *sola scriptura*, which became fundamental to many of the reformers of the sixteenth century. Wyclif's *Opus Evangelicum* is his statement that the faith found in Scripture is sufficient for the regulation of the whole Church in the world.³¹ The faith as set out in the Sermon on the Mount contains all that is needful to govern everyone in this life, without the addition of any 'human tradition'.³² No other law has force unless it conforms to this. In the days of the first beginnings of the Church, that was understood, and indeed the apostles and their followers were 'ruled by the pure law of the Gospel'.³³ Hus too gives a definition of a heretic which takes Scripture to be the only secure test. 'A heretic, properly speaking and strictly is someone who insistently contradicts the word of Holy Scripture, in writing or in deed'. There are three essential elements in this definition. There must be an error in understanding, a falsehood which is contrary to Holy Scripture, persistence in the wrong opinion.³⁴ Dissent from the teaching of an institutional Church on which Hus no longer felt able to

rely is no indicator of heresy; it therefore does not enter into this definition.

Areas Where Disagreement May be Allowed

In the present day, the question tends to be whether the Christian ought to be looking for a fixed point of reference at all. The twentieth century saw fundamental challenges from academic theologians, which continue into the twenty-first. Mid-twentieth-century 'Process' theology explored the idea that God is not the changeless being of the early Christian world but a dynamic force, himself able to alter. Other theologians have interpreted the death of Christ as a message to the world that God himself is vulnerable. Others still have spoken of the 'death of God' and the 'post-Christian world'.

Where missionaries in the nineteenth century had taken a ready-made faith and with it a good deal of the culture of the West and imposed them upon the communities of new Christians they won to the faith, twentieth-century missionaries became more sensitive to the cultures of others. There was talk of 'inculturation', the degree to which Christianity could and should accommodate itself to the culture it enters. In parts of Africa polygamy is the social norm. Should Christians in such societies be allowed to have more than one spouse?

There was some recognition even before the twentieth century that not every difference of opinion ought to be 'church-dividing'. Some things may not matter; they may be questions on which Christians remain free to take different views. A variety of different points have presented themselves in different periods as 'unresolved questions' on which

the Church has taken no settled view and on which there is therefore no orthodoxy. Many of these have remained 'things indifferent' (*adiaphora*), and therefore matters on which no position (within a certain range of options) is 'heretical'. The origin of the soul is an important example. Both Augustine (354–430) and Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109) left unsettled the question whether God makes a fresh soul for each child which is conceived (the 'creationist' theory) or the soul is somehow inherited or handed on with the body which is conceived (the '*traducianis*' theory). John Wyclif discusses whether the world was created *successive vel subita*, over a series of 'days' as it says in Genesis, or in a single divine act. He explains that Augustine and those who follow him seem to disagree with other sources who have taken a view on this matter. Possibly, he suggests, learned men who seem to hold the opposite opinion to Augustine's were speaking only *opinative* (as a matter of opinion).³⁵

In practice the decision that something really matters has often been precipitated by those who hold dissident opinions, when they have pressed them insistently against the stated objections of the Church's 'authorities' until the matter has become an 'issue'. There comes a moment when there are formal condemnations and an area of 'orthodoxy' comes into being which was previously not crystallized. That is where 'the importance of unity' comes to the test.

This has been a chapter with a presumption – that unity is best for the Church and for believers, because it is what Christ intended. That certainty has been central to the ecumenical movement of the last century. For centuries before it was the justification both for trying to get agreement and for excluding those who would not agree, sometimes subjecting

them to extremely harsh treatment, to compel them to 'conform'. In today's world 'diversity' and 'tolerance' have an attraction earlier centuries did not so easily recognize. So a running question as we move on will be whether this call for unity still stands up as securely as it did.