

Ecclesiola Ecclesia

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The subject allotted to me is one that comes in a logical sequence as well as in a chronological sequence to what we have already heard in this Conference. It is in a sense a kind of postscript, or critique of the approaches to reformation which we have been considering, and may, therefore, legitimately come under the general heading, although in and of itself it cannot properly be defined as 'an approach' to reformation.

In other words what I am going to put before you is something which, I trust I shall be able to demonstrate, throws light upon those various points of view towards, and efforts at reformation which were carried through in the 16th century. But in addition, and this is why it is so important for us, I think I will be able to show that it has a very real relevance to the pastoral position in which most of us who are pastors here today find ourselves, having as members of churches many, unfortunately, whom we can at best only regard as nominal Christians. The subject before us will inevitably raise the question as to what our attitude should be to these people who are in the church, but concerning whom as evangelical pastors we may have serious reservations.

I

First of all let us define the term 'Ecclesiola in Ecclesia'. It is very important that we should be clear as to the precise definition, because the whole argument turns on this precision. What does it mean? It really means 'little church in the church' or 'little churches within a church'. In other words the idea of those who formed these little

churches was not to form a new church. That is basic. They were not concerned at all about separation; indeed they were bitterly and violently opposed to it. They were not out to change the doctrine of the church. The early Reformers in this country, like Thomas Bilney and others, were out to do that; but the people who believed in forming 'ecclesiolae' had no such intention whatsoever.

What were they concerned about? Well, their position was that they were not so much dissatisfied with the nature as with the functioning of the church. They were not concerned about the church's doctrine, but were very concerned about its spiritual life and condition.

This is quite basic to our whole outlook upon this subject. The people who believed in the idea of the 'ecclesiola' were not out to change the whole church, but to form a church within a church which would form a nucleus of true believers inside the general church. Their object in the formation of this nucleus was that it might act as a leaven and influence the life of the whole church for the better. That is the definition. It was thought of in terms of the local church and local churches. It was not a movement, but something that was to happen in individual local churches.

That being our definition, we have to understand further— and this was true, I think we can say, of all the men who became interested in this and tried to put it into practice — that for these people this was only a second best. The argument seems to be that if the attempt to reform the whole church fails, well then, all you can do, and the thing that you should do, is to form this nucleus within the church which you trust will permeate the life of the whole and eventually reform it.

The subject is in some ways a little difficult to handle because it was attempted by a number of different men in different countries and in different centuries. I must not weary you with a detailed description of all these. Indeed I deliberately refrain from this because to do so might only end in confusion. I am much more concerned about the principle involved in the idea. That, it seems to me, is the important thing for us.

But we must give some general indication as to how this idea was put into operation. There are certain things which were common to practically all of them. For instance, they were all animated by that same fundamental idea. They all likewise stressed the voluntary membership of these nuclei. People could either join this inner church, this little nucleus, or not; it was left entirely to their own volition. But the moment you did join you had to submit to a very strict discipline. They kept a list of members and observed their attendances very closely, and if a man or a woman failed to turn up with regularity he or she would be excluded, excommunicated. Sometimes indeed, a fine was imposed.

What did they do in these societies? Actually there was a good deal of variation about this, but the central idea in all of them was that the meetings should be an occasion for instruction which could not be given in the open preaching. Most of them held this kind of meeting of this select company, the true believers in the church, once a week. They

met in a more informal manner, and there they could go over the sermons preached on the previous Sunday, and people would have opportunities for asking questions and discussion. Some gave opportunity for people to relate their experiences, others frowned upon that and did not believe in it at all. In the case of those that appeared in Germany there was a good deal of discussion of doctrine, and indeed at times of philosophy, and they almost became debating societies; whereas in others doctrinal discussions were completely banned and prohibited. So you see there was this considerable variation in the way in which meetings were conducted, but this does not affect the principle.

Another thing that is common to most of these meetings is that they gave opportunities to the laymen. This is where we touch on that question of the universal priesthood of all believers, referred to in an earlier paper. These people felt that the laymen had not been given sufficient opportunity, so in these gatherings the laymen were allowed to speak and put questions. That is an important principle for us to bear in mind. There was a good deal of difference with regard to the place of women. In most of them women were allowed. In the case of Spener, the German to whom I shall be referring, women were allowed to attend these meetings but they had to be behind a screen out of sight, and they were not allowed to speak! Others were very careful to divide even between married men and single men, and married women and single women, and particularly where the question of the giving of experiences was involved.

Another point which is of importance is that they nearly all insisted upon ministerial supervision. Some of them taught that the minister himself should always be in charge of the meetings; others took a freer view and said that the people, if they liked, could choose a pastor of their own. Luther, for instance, took that point of view. But they nearly all agreed about the need of ministerial supervision because there were some instances where people like this met together without such supervision and it ended in a good deal of trouble in the form of excesses. Nevertheless they were all interested in giving the lay people a greater part to play, a greater influence in the life of the church.

II

Those are some of the general characteristics of these 'little churches within the church'. Let us now turn to some historical examples.

In a sense it can be said that the first example in history of this kind of nucleus within the Church in general, strange though it may sound to us, is monasticism. In principle the idea behind monasticism was very much the same; it was a dissatisfaction with the general state of the church and a calling together of men who were concerned about this and anxious to do something about it. They remained within the church; they did not want to go out of it; indeed that was the last thing they thought of. They were in the church, but they were a special body within it. And, of course, as time passed you had the phenomenon of nuclei being formed inside the original nucleus as the original nucleus tended to degenerate. Another pre-Reformation illustration of this idea is found

in the case of the United Brethren who certainly started in this way. I think that you can include the Waldensians also under this heading.

I do not want to stay with these because the first really big example which we have of a man seriously considering this whole matter of an 'ecclesiola in the ecclesia' is none other than Martin Luther. This is where we follow on so directly from what we have already been considering. Calvin and Zwingli never considered this idea, and as far as I can discover were really opposed to it. They certainly never tried to put it into practice. Obviously the Anabaptists also never considered it at all. The action that they had taken was the exact opposite of this, and because of the nature of that action they argued that this was unnecessary. What they had done, they said, was right; they had separated, they had gone out. The principle behind Anabaptism is therefore the very antithesis of what we are considering here.

But Luther is a particularly interesting case with regard to this whole matter. I hope to emphasize and point out certain questions which arise in particular out of the fact that Luther of all people not only toyed with and played with, but advocated the formation of these 'ecclesiolae'. He began to think of this as far back as 1522 and 1523; but it was in 1526 that he published something really definite on the subject. It was in his 'Preface to the German Mass' that he put the thing quite plainly and said that something along these lines must be done.

Why did he do so? Here is the interesting thing — he did it because he was profoundly depressed by the state of the church. From 1513 onto 1520 and even 1521 he was on the crest of a wave as it were. There was great excitement and everything seemed to be going well. But then a reaction set in, the reformed impetus seemed to be pausing, nothing much seemed to be happening. A spirit of caution arose, people were hesitant, political considerations came in and Luther became profoundly depressed. But still more important, and still more serious, he was disturbed at the condition of the church to which he himself belonged, the churches which had responded to his teaching. He felt that they were lacking in true spiritual life and vigour, that they were not living the Christian life; so he began to feel the need of discipline. The Protestants had even been defeated in military battle, and baffled, and he felt that that was mainly due to their lack of discipline, that their whole life was lacking in discipline. Therefore a measure of discipline should be introduced into the church. Another thing that greatly aggravated this feeling which developed in him was the phenomenon of Anabaptists. He was upset by them, and he reacted strongly against them. He felt that the true church, which followed him, must be protected against them, and the only way to do that was to impose discipline.

Luther's relationship to the Anabaptists is a most fascinating one; it is a kind of ambivalent relationship. He reacted against them, and yet in a sense he admired them and was a little bit jealous of the wonderful discipline that they were able to exercise in their own churches. He had to admit that there was a quality of life in their churches which was absent in the churches to which he belonged. So he reacts in two ways to them; he has got to discipline his people against them, and yet he wishes to have in his

church the kind of thing that was working so well in their churches. The result of all this was that he felt that the only thing to do was to form these nuclei within the churches. He seemed to be failing to reform the whole church; well then, the best he could do was this second best, which was to gather together the people who are truly Christian into a kind of inner church.

Luther went so far as to say that these are the only people who should be allowed to partake of the Lord's Supper. The others are members of the church, remember, but it is only these true Christians whom he would allow to partake of the Lord's Supper; the others are unfit to do so. So he carries this distinction in his mind to the extent that while all are in the church, the general church, the state church, the land church — call it whatever you like — the only people who are fit to come to the Communion are those who belong to this inner body.

That was Luther's idea, and he proposed now that this should be put into practice. But he never did so, for two main reasons. One was that he felt that he could not discover the people who were fit to belong to the nucleus. It was as bad as that; and that is a very serious consideration. But the other was the Imperial Diet of Speier which was issued in 1526. This was a purely political action on the part of the Emperor which appeared to be giving liberty to the heads of these states, the Electors, so Luther began to think that perhaps after all he could do the big thing. Here was an opportunity which had not been present hitherto. Everything had seemed to be against him, the Electors were so slow and lethargic and fearful; but at last they seemed to be given freedom to reform by the Emperor himself, so Luther felt that he could abandon the second best and go back to the original idea of reform. The result was that, as far as action was concerned, the idea of 'ecclesiola' came to an end there and then. But more than once later on he seems to be looking back wistfully to this idea of the 'ecclesiola'. When he becomes discouraged he goes back to it in his mind; but he never really put it into operation.

Another contemporary proponent of this idea was a man of the name of Franz Lambert. He had been a Franciscan but he had been converted. While travelling, he went to Zurich and met Zwingli and was very impressed by him. Then he went on to Strassburg and met Martin Bucer (or Butzer, as he preferred to be called). While he was there, Philip of Hesse became anxious to reform the church in his area, and he was advised to consult Franz Lambert who had now developed ideas about a kind of perfect church, a church of true Christian people. So Lambert went to Philip and drew up his scheme. Philip was on the point of accepting it, but he thought that perhaps he had better consult Luther first, and he did so. Luther by this time had changed his mind, and strongly advised Philip not to do this. The result was that Lambert's ideas were never put into practice there. Lambert then took a post as lecturer in the new University of Marburg and died about 1530. The whole thing came to an end at that point.

That incident provokes the following remark about Luther. It does seem to me to be increasingly clear that Luther never really thought out his doctrine of the church truly. He believed, of course, in the church, and in the true church; he was concerned to bring

back the church of the New Testament, but I do suggest that he never really thought it through. We have been reminded that Calvin did so in a way that Luther never did. Indeed I think that Luther can be quite honestly and fairly described as an opportunist.

Now in a sense that is not a criticism. We have got to remember the position in which Luther found himself. He had rediscovered the doctrine of justification by faith only and had experienced its liberating power, and what he desired was that that be made known to all people everywhere. His chief idea of the church was that it is a body that does that. But it seems to me that he never worked it out in detail and the result was that he was always improvising. He would often change his mind and his opinion according to changing circumstances. I have already shown that he did so over this one particular matter. He gets influenced by events and he goes back to an idea and rejects it again, and so on. He was a truly great man, and one cannot help but admire him even at this particular point. Yet we do know that what he said and taught tended to be not only adopted but hardened into fixed dogma which has influenced the Lutheran Church ever since. This throws light on the subsequent history of the Christian church; it emphasizes the whole danger of regarding any man as an ultimate oracle and that everything he said and did and thought is the only rule.

We come now to another man who is much more important in this connection, and that is Martin Bucer or Butzer, of Strassburg. He was a man above all others who became concerned about the great need of discipline. You will remember that he influenced John Calvin a good deal because Calvin spent a number of years in Strassburg with Bucer and found his wife there. He was certainly influenced by Bucer in his whole attitude to the need of discipline. I think it is fair to say that Bucer struggled with this problem, in a sense, more than any one of these men, and what he was concerned about above all else was that discipline in the church should be ecclesiastical and not by the civil power. That was the thing for which he fought and contended, and he had to go on doing so for a number of years.

Bucer published a book in 1546 bearing the title *The Need and Failure of the Churches and how to Improve Them*, and he approached the whole problem in a thoroughly biblical manner. He has been attacked as being a biblicist; well, that is just a compliment to him in that he was concerned to base everything upon the plain teaching of the Scriptures. He drew up a scheme in terms of this which continued for a few years in spite of great opposition, and in the end, owing to a political event, Bucer and a friend had to leave the country and they came to England. In a few years he had died and the whole thing came to nothing. Indeed his ideas were rejected and what he had inaugurated was quite deliberately undone.

Those were the chief attempts at this idea in the 16th century. As we move on to the 17th century, we come to a most important man, a most important name — Philip Jacob Spener. He has been called ‘the father of Pietism’, and he had a great influence on the religious life of our country through the Moravians, and ultimately the Methodists, in the 18th century. He was born a Lutheran and was a very able man. He was early influenced by the book of Arndt called *What is true Christianity?* and also, let us not

forget (because there is a two-way traffic in these matters), greatly influenced by a famous book called *The Practice of Piety*, by Lewis Bayly, one time Bishop of Bangor in North Wales.

Under these influences Spener became quite a remarkable teacher and preacher. He got on to this whole idea of the 'ecclesiola' in this way. He was, as I say, a great and influential preacher, influential in the sense that a number of young men students and others listening to him regularly were so moved by his preaching that they wanted further instruction from him, and asked if he would be good enough to meet with them. That is how the whole thing started. He began to meet with these men in his own house to start with, then in other houses, and then in public buildings and so on, the whole idea being to give further instruction to these people who were anxious to learn and to live a holy life.

Spener, again, was an orthodox Lutheran. He did not desire to change anything in the realm of doctrine; he did not want to go out of the church; he was not concerned, in a sense, about reforming the church. What he was concerned about was the life and piety of the church; and so he began to meet with these people. He formed what he called Collegia Pietatis, and to help them he published a book called *Pia Desideria*, which has recently been re-published and is available in this country. Translated, this title means, 'Earnest desires for a reform of the true Evangelical church', and it is a most important and valuable book. In it Spener analyzes the position and causes of the spiritual decline, and what, in his view, can be done with respect to it, and so on.

Spener was actively opposed to the idea of separation and he produced a whole series of arguments against it. These were, that the possibility of affecting the others in the church for good is forfeited, and a breach of love is committed; a wound is torn in the side of Christ's body, already sufficiently split and rent; the papists are given an opportunity for derision; it is contrary to the example of divine patience shown by the Saviour and also by the Apostles and Prophets; the separatists injure themselves; and one separation always leads to another. True Christians must therefore not think of going out and separating; what they must do is to form these 'colleges' within the churches, and then as they grow and their influence increases they will affect the whole lump.

Another, who was contemporary with Spener, though thirty years younger, was again one who has had a great deal of influence on the Christian life of this country. August Hermann Francke. You may have heard of him in connection with the work of George Muller and Muller's Orphan Homes. Francke is famous for the orphanage which he began, and George Muller is not the only one who borrowed his idea. George Whitefield did exactly the same thing in the 18th century, and Howel Harris had the idea for his community at Trevecca also from Francke.

It has been rightly said about Francke and Spener that what animated them was the desire to stress the inner spiritual life and experience as over against 'the secularization of the State church, the ecclesiasticism of orthodoxy, the purely external Christianity

that had developed and the petrification of doctrine'. In the 17th century Lutheranism developed into a kind of scholasticism. The term 'petrification' is quite a fair one. Doctrine had become petrified, it was lifeless, it was useless, it was something purely intellectual. Pietism was a protest, if you like, against formalism.

These two men fought this battle thoroughly and had to suffer a lot. They were both very able theologians and commentators. It is a tragedy that we in this country are so lacking in literature on these two men and in translations of their writings. Wherever they went, and they had to move from one place to another, they started these 'colleges' or 'ecclesiolae', and they certainly had a potent influence upon the life of Germany.

One man influenced by them — and he is the next I have to mention — is none other than Count Zinzendorf who, of course, belongs mainly to the 18th century. Now here again was a man who started as a very orthodox Lutheran and did not want to leave the Lutheran Church. He is an interesting case from the standpoint of this idea of the 'ecclesiolae' because, having started with it, he departed from it. I shall be showing in a moment how that is a tendency that is inherent and incipient, it seems to me, in the whole idea; and in the case of Zinzendorf, as you know, it did eventually lead to a separation and to the formation of the United Brethren, or Moravian Brethren, which became a sectarian body.

III

There, we have looked very hurriedly at the history of this idea on the Continent of Europe. I could mention other countries also. This influence came into Holland as well; in fact there was an attempt at something like this in most countries especially where the works of Spener and Francke became well-known.

But turning to this country, what do we find? Here is a most interesting thing. Were the Puritans believers in the 'ecclesiola in ecclesia'? There is only one answer, and that is that they were not, strange though it may sound at first. Puritanism at its outset was a movement, a spirit, an influence, but not in terms of the idea of an 'ecclesiola'. It was a school of thought, it was not even a society, or a defined group. But the material point for us is that the Puritans were not concerned to form these nuclei within the church. Many of them in practice seemed to be doing that, but I think it can be pointed out that that was not their intention nor their objective. If it did happen it was a kind of accident, because the majority in the church did not respond to what they were anxious to do for them. They never consciously went out to set up these 'little churches within the church'; indeed their primary object was to influence the whole of the Church of England, and to carry on the reform which they felt had stopped instead of going on and completing itself. So they do not come under this particular heading.

Has this idea, then, no advocates in this country? It has. There is a famous example of this in the case of Dr Anthony Horneck. It is he who really first started this idea in this country; and he did so in 1678. He was a German, a very able man, and a very able

preacher. He became the preacher at the Savoy Chapel about 1671, and, again, in a most interesting way he was driven, as it were, to form an 'ecclesiola' in exactly the same way as Spener. It was entirely the result of his preaching. He influenced able, thoughtful young men and they came to him with the request that he should meet with them. He began to do so, and out of that the whole idea developed, and from his example the thing spread widely. As in the previous examples they again met every week, and Horneck was very strict in his discipline. He would not allow discussion on controverted points of theology; such discussions were entirely banned. The gatherings were intended to be meetings for devotional purposes. I must go on repeating this, because the primary idea which they all certainly had in all places and at all times was devotional rather than primarily theological.

Others began to follow and to form the same kind of societies. Here I must put in a note. You may have read of 'Societies for the Reformation of Manners'. Now they are not strictly speaking 'ecclesiolae in ecclesia' at all; they had a different object and intention, they had a more purely practical purpose. But the question is, why did Horneck and others ever resort to this expedient of 'the little church within the church'? The answer again is a profound dissatisfaction with the spiritual state and condition of the Church of England. As the result of what had happened in 1662, and the influence of the Restoration period headed by King Charles II and his company, the state of the Church, spiritually speaking, had sunk to such a low level that these men felt that it was the only thing to do.

Another great name in this connection is that of Josiah Woodward who preached in Poplar. I cannot stay with him. He wrote an account of these societies, and the result of the publication of his book, which passed very quickly through several editions, was that the whole idea became extremely popular and these 'Religious Societies' as they were called (they were nothing but these 'ecclesiolae') spread all over the country. Thus when you come to the time of George Whitefield you will find that, when he began to be used of God in that phenomenal manner, he told his converts to go to these societies at Bristol, London, and in other places. He recognized their value, although by this time they had lost most of their spirituality, and it was his hope that they might help his converts and that they, in turn, might be helped by the converts.

Thus we come on to the 18th century. Another man who introduced and practised this idea in his church was William Grimshaw, of Haworth. Another was Samuel Walker, of Truro. His case is interesting and very important, especially because of his correspondence, not to say controversy, with John Wesley. Samuel Walker really formed an 'ecclesiola' in his church. Henry Venn did the same thing in Huddersfield, and Charles Simeon did it in Cambridge.

What of Methodism? Here again is a most interesting case. Methodism is, and is not, an illustration of this at one and the same time, very much in the same way as happened in the case of Zinzendorf. The Wesleys, and Whitefield for that matter, and, of course, the Countess of Huntingdon in particular, are a difficult case for this reason, that they were not content to stop at an 'ecclesiola in ecclesia', but went beyond that. They, of course,

were first and foremost concerned about the care of their converts; that was their controlling idea. They could see that their converts could not fit in to the churches as they then were, and they felt that they must make some provision for them. So in that respect, even at the very beginning, there is a difference between them and the idea behind the 'ecclesiolae'. With the Methodists it was not so much a calling out of the most Christian people and forming them into a society, but the needs of the new converts of the revival, and what could be done for them. Others, of course, were allowed to join. In the case of John Wesley he would admit to his societies people who were not members of the Church of England, so there he definitely departs from this whole idea of the 'ecclesiola'. And not only that! Because of his organizing genius, it seems to me that from the very beginning there was a powerful and prominent sectarian tendency in the Methodist societies, and the moment the Conference was organized and arranged I feel he had already crossed the line. It is all very well to say Wesley died a member of the Church of England. You can recognize many things on paper, but what really matters is what you do in practice. He really was a sectarian from the time of starting of the annual Conference, although he tried to argue that it was not so. But from the beginning it was surely quite inevitable that Methodism should become a distinct and separate body.

The case of Brethrenism (Plymouth) by definition does not call for consideration because it is essentially separatist.

There is our historical review except for one further case. I think that the most perfect illustration of this idea of the 'ecclesiola in ecclesia' that can be found is in the case of Norway. There was a great revival in that country in the early part of the last century, the main leader of which was a farmer of the name of Hauge. He held very strongly that his converts must not leave the moribund Lutheran church of Norway, so what he did was to organize them within the church and he called it the 'inner mission'. It is still there today. The famous Professor Hallesby belonged to this 'inner mission'. They are within the Lutheran church, but they are a distinct and separate body within it. They have their own seminary, their own foreign mission society, their own schools and so on. That is, perhaps, the most perfect example of an 'ecclesiola in ecclesia' that has ever been known.

IV

What happened to these efforts, these experiments in forming little churches within the churches? The answer is that with the notable exception of Norway they all ended in failure. Luther, as we have seen, himself came to the conclusion that the idea was impracticable because he could not find the people, could not find a sufficient number of good Christian people to form such an 'ecclesia'. There were also the other factors to which I have referred. In the case of Bucer, as I have told you, it ended in ultimate failure. I know that political factors came in, and that circumstances made a very big difference particularly in his case, but the point is that it came to nothing.

But I want to go further and to suggest that this whole idea is bound to come to nothing for various reasons. Here are some of them.

Is it not inevitable that the larger portion of the church, which you may call if you like the nominal church, will always resent this? If you divide up your church and say, 'I am going to call out the true Christians and I am going to have special meetings for them', what effect is that going to have upon the others? It is bound to arouse resentment and opposition; and it has invariably done so. So that far from helping these other people you create within them a spirit of antagonism.

Secondly, is there not implicit in it, as I have suggested, a sectarian element in its very essence? You are causing a division.

Then another factor which has always militated against this idea is that it has always produced tension over the question of churchmanship and over the relationship of the minister to this. Imagine a minister, a non-evangelical minister, a 'dead' minister, as it were, in a church where such an 'ecclesiola' is formed and in which the people are entitled to choose their own leader. It is inevitable that tensions are bound to arise.

Another cause of trouble — and they all had this, including Spener and Francke — was in connection with excesses. Some people are always ready to go too far and to abuse the privileges. Discussion tended to become wrangling, and the relating of intimate personal experiences and feelings is always likely to lead to trouble, and so the authorities have to intervene.

Another inherent defect in this idea, and again it is practically inevitable, is spiritual pride — spiritual pride in these people whom you call out, and who are ready to be called out because they regard themselves as being better than the others. And there is nothing more dangerous to the soul than spiritual pride.

A further difficulty arose in this way. This idea is all right as long as you have an evangelical minister. But what happens when he leaves and is replaced by a non-evangelical minister? This happened in the case of Samuel Walker. He opposed Wesley. He told the latter that he must not organize his societies as he was doing, that the right method, the only safe method, was a group within the church guided by the minister himself. Samuel Walker scarcely allowed anybody to speak at all, but did all the speaking himself, even in the 'ecclesiola'. He was so concerned that none of the sectarian tendency should come in. However, what actually happened was that when Samuel Walker died the members of his 'ecclesiola' left the Church, St Mary's, Truro, and the majority of them joined the two Countess of Huntingdon's churches in Cornwall. Thus the whole experiment came to an end. Exactly the same thing happened when Henry Venn left Huddersfield and went to the little village of Yelling. The 'ecclesiola' disappeared in Huddersfield. Venn got into trouble over this because, having gone from Huddersfield to Yelling, his successor did not carry on in the same way, and the members of the 'ecclesiola' wrote to Venn for advice and instruction. He gave it to them, and thereby, of course, broke the rules. He should not have done that. A minister who

interferes in his former church in that way is asking for trouble. Venn regretted afterwards that he had ever done this.

The point is that for these various reasons the experiments of 'the little church within the church' failed. All this is a sheer matter of history; one of two things happened to them all. They either failed in the way I have been describing, or, secondly, they ended definitely in separation and the formation of a new church. That happened, as I have shown, in the case of Methodism in England. It happened in exactly the same way with Calvinistic Methodism in Wales, which became a separate denomination in Wales in 1811.

V

That leads to the next vital question — can these 'ecclesiolae in ecclesia' be justified on any grounds? First, can they be justified on scriptural grounds? How do you justify this procedure? Many of us, I know, have been tempted to do this very thing in our churches. You have had the idea of calling together your truly Christian people to pray for revival or something like that. Well, is there any justification for this on scriptural grounds? These men were scriptural men as I have been emphasizing and they did quote the Scriptures in defence of their procedure. What were they?

These are the only Scriptures they could find to justify this procedure of the 'ecclesiola in ecclesia': 'Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst' (Matthew 18:20); 'And I myself also am persuaded of you, my brethren, that ye also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another' (Romans 15:14); 'Speaking to yourselves in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord' (Ephesians 5:19); 'Wherefore comfort one another with these words' (1 Thessalonians 4:18); 'Now we exhort you, brethren, warn them that are unruly, comfort the feeble-minded, support the weak, be patient toward all men' (1 Thessalonians 5:14); 'For every one that useth milk is unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe' (Hebrews 5:13). That does indicate that there are different kinds of people in the church; does it do any more? 'Let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together as the manner of some is, but exhorting one another: and so much the more as ye see the day approaching' (Hebrews 10:24, 25). Those were the Scriptures that they produced, and the question we have to ask is whether any one of them is really applicable to this point? Does any one of them justify the formation of an 'ecclesiola in ecclesia'?

The New Testament clearly recognizes that there are different kinds of people in the church. There are some who are strong, and some who are weak. There are some who are called 'ye that are spiritual', implying that there are those who are less spiritual. There are all these kinds of divisions and differences and distinctions recognized in the members of the church. We are always exhorted to bear one another's burdens, and the strong must help the weak, and so on. But surely none of these justify this kind of

drawing out of some from amongst the others? Not one of these texts does so in any shape or form. I would go as far as to say that this procedure is one which is directly contrary to the New Testament teaching. If you do regard the church as a gathering of true believers, and if you insist upon the three marks of a true church, where is there even a vestige of scriptural substantiation for this kind of practice? The New Testament is always concerned about the whole church. It does not recognize any separation and special treatment for a nucleus. Its teaching always is that the members of the church are sharing and are participating together in these things and are enjoying them together. Surely the New Testament does not cater for anything but that?

The advocates of this idea did not mention, any of them, as far as I can make out, the Parable of the Tares; and rightly so of course, because that does not deal with this kind of issue at all. It is concerned about the question of judgment, but in no way does it justify the minister or anyone else, performing an act of separation and calling out certain people for special treatment and for special instruction. So it seems to me that we are left without any scriptural warrant at all for this procedure. This will, of course, finally determine our whole attitude towards the question.

There is one special question which I should like to raise before I come to a few final questions which this whole story seems to me to pose for us. Some may feel, perhaps, that this is the idea that we ought to adopt as evangelical people at this present time. If there is going to be a great world church does not this teaching and this idea indicate to us that we as evangelicals should be the nucleus, the 'ecclesiola' in the great world 'ecclesia'? Many believe that we should 'stay in' in order to infiltrate and influence in an evangelical direction — 'In it to win it', as someone has put it.

What is the answer to that? It seems to me that that can be negated quite easily in this way. As I emphasized in the definition, none of these people were concerned primarily about doctrine. There was no difficulty about that; they were all concerned about practice and about spirituality. Can anyone suggest that any of the men I have mentioned would allow or even tolerate within the church men who deny most of the cardinal doctrines of the Christian faith? We know perfectly well that they would not. They had separated from Rome and they denounced Rome and her teaching. Not only that, we know what they did with people whom they regarded as heretics. They expelled them, and some of them advocated that they should even be put to death. So there is no case for the argument that we can borrow from this idea of the 'ecclesiola in ecclesia' support for the idea that we can remain in the same general 'world church' with men who are not only heretics but who are notorious opponents of the truth of God as it is in Christ Jesus our Lord as we see it.

VI

Let me therefore put to you what! regard as the urgent questions that this story of the 'ecclesiola in ecclesia' idea raises for us.

Can a view of the church which leads to the necessity of forming an 'ecclesiola in ecclesia' possibly be right? The great Reformation, the great divide had just taken place, yet Luther by 1522 was already having to think of this idea. Was not there something essentially wrong with his whole idea of the church? If you have to resort to this expedient does it not *ipso facto* suggest that there is something incomplete in the Reformation because there is something wrong in your whole view of the church? That question arises, and it is a most important one.

The second question, obviously must be: what is a Christian? Luther said that the majority of the members of the church were not fit to come to the Communion Table. Lambert definitely described them as heathen. And yet they were members of the church! He said they were heathen who needed to be evangelized. Well, we have heard of people today who say that they regard the church as 'a good place to fish in'. Is that a New Testament conception? Can people whom you regard as heathen be Christians and church members? You say, 'But how and who are we to decide, how can you define these matters?' But if you call them 'heathen' you are defining. A man cannot be a heathen and a Christian at the same time. So if you call them heathen you are saying that they are not Christians.

Then, thirdly, what is the Christian church? We are really facing this fundamental question. This issue brings it up. It was there immediately after the Reformation; it is with us as acutely today.

Fourthly, who should be admitted to church membership?

Fifthly, are not we today still tending to do what the Reformers did in this whole matter? Are we not failing to learn the lesson of the centuries and failing to go back to the New Testament? I think we have got to face that question. We have been reminded several times already in this conference, that the Reformers did what they did at certain points because that was the position that they found and inherited. We see clearly in the case of Luther that it was accepting what he 'found' that drove him to such depression that he had even to resort to the idea of an 'ecclesiola in ecclesia'. Should he not have seen that? But above all, should not we learn the lesson that these men teach us? We can look on objectively at what they did, and what they failed to do; but are we not tending to repeat the selfsame error?

I would put as my sixth point the familiar argument which says that if you reject this idea, if instead you call for separation, you will have to do exactly the same thing again in a hundred years or so. That is an argument that is often produced in favour of the 'ecclesiola' idea. Spenser used it. He said that you would find that, if you start separating, you will have to go on separating. That, of course, was the famous Roman Catholic charge against Protestantism. It is most interesting to note how many Protestants, even evangelicals, still use it against other Protestants, It is really a Roman Catholic argument, and they are the only people who are really entitled to use it. But in any case it is a foolish argument. Who ever claimed that we are in a position to legislate for the church in perpetuity? We are only responsible for the church in our own day and

generation. Of course you may have to go on doing this. We pray that you do not have to; but in any case the question for us is, what are we doing, how are we facing our position, and the challenge of our present position? What our grandchildren may do is not our responsibility; but we are responsible for what is happening now.

Then I go on to the seventh question. Take the argument that Spenser used, and it is still being used, that if instead of forming the 'ecclesiola' you go out, you will lose your opportunity of influencing those people and that therefore you must stay in with them in order that you may influence them and make Christians of them. There is only one thing to say about this — it seems to me to be based entirely on a lack of faith in the power of the Holy Spirit. It is true to say today that the religious bodies and denominations that are growing most rapidly in the United States of America are the ones that are most rigorous and which have the highest standard. In any case we have evidence before our very eyes that our staying amongst such people does not seem to be converting them to our view but rather to a lowering of the spiritual temperature of those who are staying amongst them and an increasing tendency to doctrinal accommodation and compromise. But in any case it seems to me to be sheer lack of faith in the power of the Holy Spirit. We are forgetting the 'doctrine of the Remnant'. We are trusting to expediency and expedients and not saying that, if we are faithful, the Holy Spirit has promised to honour us and our testimony, however small our numbers and however despised by 'the wise and prudent'.

So I come to the last question which seems to me to be raised, and I think it is the most acute question of all. God forbid that this last question should ever cause a division amongst us who are evangelical, but it does seem to me that this story of the 'ecclesiola in ecclesia' raises this great question. It was there at the beginning with Luther; it is still here. Should we start with the situation and the position as it is and try to reform it, or should we start with the New Testament and apply it? It comes to that! The Reformers began with the situation as they found it, and as we have been reminded several times in the conference, their policy was to reform it. If their premise was right I think their procedure can be justified. You must then be patient and diplomatic and so on.

But the great question I am raising is this — were they right in that original question? Where do you start? Do you start with the existing situation and try by adjustment and accommodation and meetings and fellowship and readiness to give and take for the sake of the body that is already there, to get the best modifications you can? Is it that? History seems to show that, if you do start with that, you will soon be having to think of starting an 'ecclesiola in ecclesia' because of the dead wood in the church. That seems to me to be the argument of history. Do you start with that then?

Or do you rather start by asking 'What is the New Testament teaching?' Let us start with that. Our one object and endeavour should be to put that into practice, cost what it may, believing that as we are trying to conform to the New Testament pattern we shall be blessed of God. It is a difficult, it is a perplexing, it is a vexing question. As I have tried to remind you, in all fairness, the Reformers were concerned to bring back the New Testament idea; but they failed. There was this kind of polarity in their thinking and they

kept on swinging between two basic ideas. That is why I am raising this as the ultimate and fundamental question.

This is the question that remains with us, and the ecumenical movement, it seems to me, has made it a more urgent question than it has been for several centuries. The leaders of that movement are saying, let us throw everything into the melting-pot. They are not actually doing that because they are committed to the principle of modification and accommodation. But they are saying it. Well, let us say it! Let us say that we are living in a situation where we really must and can face these things in a new and fundamental manner. Let us determine to do so in the light of the New Testament teaching and not in the light of 'the scientific man of the mid-twentieth century' or in the light of 'the results of scholarship and of latest knowledge'. It is a profound, it is a fundamental question, and I believe that every one of us will not only have to face it but also have to decide one way or the other, and that very soon. May God keep us all humble, may He give us great charity, give us great patience, but above all may He give us a single eye to His glory and to His praise.

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