

Historian or Legend Maker *

Robert B. Tapp



EVERY institution seems to retain legendary accounts of its past which serve to criticize and guide the present. Orthodox Christians today speak hopefully of "Christian reunion" as though there had once been, in some "golden age," a united church. Or they sing hymns based upon *Ephesians'* "one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism." Most ecumenical discussions of church unity start by a review of the Bible and the primitive church, assuming the normativeness of those days when there was only "one Body and one Spirit."

John Knox, distinguished New Testament scholar of New York's Union Seminary, is concerned in *The Early Church and the Coming Great Church* to dispel all such notions. From the outset, he shows, division and diversity characterized Christian worship, theology and organization. Perhaps most of us have been taught to mistrust the *Acts of the Apostles* as reliable history. It is nonetheless refreshing to see Knox's scalpel move through documentary "proud flesh" as he goes behind the legendary accounts to the real situation of developing Christianity.

Common sense indicates that there must have been some basis of commonality beneath this diversity. Readers of Knox's three earlier books on Jesus know the stress he places upon the "event-as-remembered." From an objective standpoint, the career of Jesus was "a relatively unimportant incident in Jewish history." For early Christians, however, this "event" was the source and norm of existence, since it showed God's plans and power.

There were from the beginning, Knox avers, "empirical realities of the new communal life." From these came theologies and organizational theories. The term used to express this "shared life" was Spirit. A group which knew the Spirit was convinced of the "presence" of a living Messiah-Jesus. Few liberals have expressed the origin of the resurrection-faith more bluntly than this: "The resurrection of

Jesus as an incident in time and space was an inference from, and became a symbol of, this identity."

The bulk of the book is this sort of psychologized reading of early Christian history. Knox finds the concrete group experiences preceding all the varieties of "life, faith, and form." His final chapter, however, raises the questions that will interest religious liberals. After all, it is one thing to make a careful study of things nineteen centuries past, and quite another to establish their relevance. Knox raises no radical questions concerning either the normativeness of the New Testament or of the early creeds. He is also willing to confer some type of "historic episcopate" on the new church of the future.

1. Can this "remembered-event" of Jesus still bring forth a creative community in the West today? Especially if we were to indulge in slippery references to a "resurrection" and a "continuous presence" of a first-century man as "historical events"? To be sure, Knox retains his integrity by subjectivizing the "factual" basis of such alleged events. Of course there can be no "history" without "historians," but our task as liberals is to sustain that fine sense of discrimination which will enable humanity to distinguish its "historians" from its "legend-makers." When he deals with his own (Christian) community, Knox seems to lose this. As a result, Christians are allowed a looseness of speech which would be sharply criticized in all others.

2. What about the other communities of mankind with their respective "remembered-events," e.g. Mahomet, Moses, Gautama, etc.? To assume that these memories must necessarily be replaced by the memory of Christianity is unduly arrogant *unless* it can be shown that the effects of the Christian memory are superior. This seems doubtful and Knox does not really face this issue at all. While greater unity among Christians may be desirable, the price of increasing insularity and parochialism seems too high. The real progress made by religious liberals, Christian and otherwise, cannot survive amalgamation with any single religion, especially in any of the ancient forms.

**The Early Church and the Coming Great Church* by John Knox. Abingdon Press, Nashville, Tenn., 1955. Price \$2.50. 160 pages.