



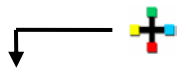
Comments on 'The Church, the Churches and the World Council of Churches'

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For the World Council of Churches to give a thoroughly rational and reassuring explanation of itself to the Churches which are its members is a rather dangerous business. One must admire the comprehensiveness and skill with which it is done in the Toronto statement. But the inherent danger remains. "The World Council," as the statement says "deals in a provisional way with divisions between existing Churches, which ought not to be, because they contradict the very nature of the Church." The deepest source of its existence is the God-given conviction that the existence of "Churches" in this sense is sinful. How then shall the Council explain itself to these Churches? That is the heart of the problem. It is natural that assurances should be asked for, and should be given, that Churches which join the Council are not thereby compelled to abandon their own convictions about the nature of the Church. But is there not a danger of being a little too reassuring? There is a perpetual danger of thinking of the Council as analogous to other organizations formed to express the common purposes of a number of separate member-societies. Such organizations do not in any sense call in question the right of the member-societies to exist. But the ecumenical



movement does, rightly understood, very definitely call in question the right of separate "Churches" to exist. Just because the World Council has already been so successful, because it has been able to do so many things so superbly well, there is a danger of its becoming accepted as a permanent organ of co-operation between Churches, analogous to the similar organizations in every branch of secular affairs. But the Council must not regard itself as permanent. It must always regard itself as - in principle - a temporary thing, a means of transition, something which will succeed precisely by "withering away." The phrase evokes the reflection that successful human organizations do not easily wither away.

Clearly a provisional neutrality is necessarily required of the Council on matters about

which its member Churches are divided. But must it not be made clearer that this neutrality is provisional? It is at least conceivable that, as the Churches listen together to what God is saying to them, they may learn that the question of visible unity is precisely the question which He is insistently putting to our generation. If that should be so, neutrality on that issue would become impossible. I am not asking for a declaration now on that issue; I am urging that any statement about the nature of the Council should leave open the possibility that it might become necessary for the Council to abandon the neutral position upon some of the ecclesiological issues which now divide Christians.

Organizations of all kinds come into existence because ideas cannot become effective in history without some kind of embodiment. The fundamental idea which the Council seeks to embody is "the conviction that the Lord of the Church is God-among-us Who continues to gather His children and to build His Church Himself." The question as to what is the proper embodiment for that idea is the central ecclesiological question. On this the Council desires to be neutral. But it cannot be more than provisionally neutral, because it is itself an embodiment of that idea. The more permanent it becomes, the more will it tend to become, in effect, committed to a certain kind of answer to that question. And it will be a wrong answer, because the proper embodiment of that idea is the Church and not a Council of Churches. Just because the Council is not the Church it will become some sort of a monster unless it continually remembers its purely provisional character.

In other words, it must be made clear that the statement defines the starting-point, and not the way or the goal. Neutrality on the issue of



the nature of the Church is necessary as a starting-point. To be committed to neutrality as a permanent principle would be to reduce the Council to the position of a debating-society. In fact, as suggested in the last paragraph, unless the Council is always kept aware of its purely provisional character it will, in proportion to its effectiveness in getting things done, become committed in practice to a very un-neutral position as to the nature of the visible unity of Christians. "No Church," says the statement, "is obliged to change its ecclesiology as a consequence of membership in the World Council." I should be happier if this could be amended to read: "No Church is obliged to change its ecclesiology as a condition of membership in the World Council." It is good that Churches should be reassured in respect of any fear that they might surrender their convictions for the sake of some man-made organization. But it is also good that they should be reminded that they might fall into the hands of the Living God. The note of expectancy is sounded in the closing sentence, where it is said that the Council "exists to serve the Churches as they prepare to meet their Lord Who knows only one flock." In other words, it is recognized that the Council is provisional in the sense that even this heaven and earth are provisional. I believe that the Council must – if it is to serve and not to betray the purpose for which it exists – acknowledge more explicitly the possibility that, this side of the End, there shall be one Flock as there is one Shepherd.

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