"The Nature of the Unity We Seek": 1. From the Church of South India

1957

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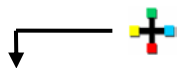
I

The unity which Christians seek must necessarily be that for which our Lord prayed, and which it is his will to give us. That unity is most succinctly described in the great prayer of St. John 17:

> Holy Father, keep them in thy name which thou hast given me, that they may be one, even as we are one.... I do not pray for these only, but also for those who are to believe in me through their word, that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. The glory which thou hast given me I have given to them, that they may be one, even as we are one, I in them and thou in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that thou hast sent me and hast loved them even as thou hast loved me. (John 17:11b, 20-23, R.S.V.)

Four things are clear from these words:

1. The unity for which we are to pray rests upon a gift of God through Jesus Christ. It is by being kept in the name which God has given, by receiving the glory which he has given, that we are to be made one.

2. The unity for which we are to pray is in the spiritual realm. It is analogous to that of the Godhead – "as thou, Father, art in me and I in thee"

3. The unity is to be visible in such a way that as a result of it the world will come to believe and know the truth of the gospel. "That the world may believe that thou hast sent me . . . that the world may know that thou hast sent me and hast loved them even as thou lovest me."

4. The unity is to be made perfect, and it looks forward to the embracing of the whole world in the sweep of God's loving purpose. "That they may be perfected into one, that the world may know…"

Let us see what is involved in these four basic truths.

II

1. The unity of Christians rests upon, derives from, the fact that the name of God and the glory of God have been given to them in Jesus Christ. In other words, God's act of holy love in Jesus Christ, by which his own inner nature is revealed, constitutes the ground of Christian unity. As God is one, so those who bear his name and the impress of his character must necessarily be one.

This means that the quest for Christian unity must always have about it the character of *repentance*. All disunity among Christians is a contradiction of that upon which their being Christians rests. It has the character of sin, being a repudiation of the God-given nature of the Church. The quest for unity must therefore be regarded not as an enterprise of men aimed at constructing something new, but as a penitent return to that which was originally given but subsequently denied.

For this reason I think that the term "reunion" is the proper term to use in this matter. This is sometimes objected to on the ground that the churches concerned were never parts of one ecclesiastical structure. Behind this objection there seems to lie a desire to assure ourselves that we are not repairing something broken but creating something new. I believe that this is a misunderstanding of our task, and that both on historical grounds and on theological we must dispute it: historical, because every division among Christians today stems ultimately from some point in history where a failure in truth, or charity, or both, led to a breach of fellowship among those who had previously regarded themselves as members of one family; theological, because the healing of such breaches of fellowship is simply a return (in however small a measure) to the true nature of the Church as grounded in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Unless we are ready to approach our task with repentance, we shall misconceive it from the beginning.

This leads to a point of great practical importance. How far is the term "comprehension" a proper one to describe what we are doing when we address ourselves to the practical task of framing a plan of reunion? The Constitution of the Church of South India contains this paragraph, written, of course, many years before the union took place:

> For the perfecting of the life of the whole body, the Church of South India needs the heritage of each of the uniting Churches, and each of those Churches will, it is hoped, not lose the continuity of its own life, but preserve that life enriched by the union with itself of the other two Churches. The Church of South India is thus formed by a combination of different elements each bringing its contribution to the whole, and not by the absorption of any one by any other. It is, therefore, also a comprehensive Church; and its members, firmly holding the fundamentals of the faith and order of

> the Church Universal, are allowed wide freedom of opinion in all other matters, and wide freedom of action in such differences of practice as are consistent with the general framework of the Church as one organised body.

When one looked at that paragraph from the point of view of one of the separate churches before 1947, it was obviously one of the essential pillars of the Scheme. None of us would be willing that our own church should be simply absorbed in another, and its whole heritage of faith and life simply canceled. But as one reads the same paragraph now, nearly ten years after the union, other thoughts come to the mind. Comprehension is the starting point. But the act of union inevitably initiates a process of profound self-examination and self-criticism. All questions are set in a new perspective. One's tradition, instead of being taken for granted as a fixed point of

reference, is brought under criticism over and over again, not in the large abstract manner characteristic of an interchurch discussion, but in the course of daily discussion of practical duty. Thus it is brought under criticism from the side of the actual contemporary situation (which will always be different from that in which the tradition received its form) and from the side of the Bible (which must always be the ultimate point of reference in such a discussion in a reformed church).

It is impossible that the tradition of the separate church should remain unaltered in the united church. Something irreversible happens when church union takes place. In a very real sense the separate churches cannot preserve the continuity of their own life, but must lose it in order to live. From the point of view of all the uniting traditions we could say that our life has been "enriched by the union," but it is an enrichment which follows the pattern of Christ's law. "He that loses his life for my sake will save it."

What, then, of the principle of comprehension? What has been said above does not negate this. On the contrary, this principle must be strongly affirmed. The process of growth through self-criticism is one which must follow, and not precede, the act of union. If the abandonment of any part of one tradition, or the acceptance of some element of another tradition, is demanded as a condition of union, then a fundamental mistake has been made. Such a demand puts the cart before the horse. The act of union is, in relation to God, an act of penitence involving the recognition that estrangement from fellow Christians is contrary to the revelation in Christ and therefore sinful; in relation to the other churches, it is an act of mutual acceptance in which, without passing judgment on each other, we accept one another as standing equally under God's judgment and God's mercy.

This comprehensiveness is not the same as relativism. Though it
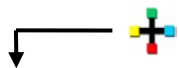
acknowledges that before God we are all equally sinners, it does not say of church traditions: "One is as good as the other, there is much to be said or all sides, and nothing to choose between them." We may strongly and rightly hold that certain ecclesiastical traditions are much nearer to the true norm than others. But the point is that our standing in God's grace is not secured by our correction of aberrations. It is simply received as a gift of grace given to all equally. And only upon that basis of a received and mutually acknowledged standing in God's grace can we rightly go on to the process of mutual criticism and correction.

Thus comprehensiveness is only saved from becoming mere relativism when it is in the context of penitence. We accept one another, not because we all agree to regard each other as good enough, but because God in his mercy has accepted us, and therefore we are bound to accept one another, That acceptance is the starting point for reformation. If the order is reversed, and acceptance is made conditional upon reformation, then we have left the sphere of grace and we shall die in our sins.

To say that the unity we seek rests upon the gift of God's name and glory in Jesus Christ involves a second important consequence which may be introduced by quoting again from the "Governing Principles" of the C. S. I.

> The Church of South India acknowledges that, in every effort to bring
> together divided members of Christ's Body into one organization, the final
> aim must be the union in the universal Church of all who acknowledge the
> name of Christ, and that the test of all local schemes of union is that they
> should express locally the principle of the great catholic unity of the Body
> of Christ.

Because the unity we seek is that which rests upon what God has done for mankind in Christ, every scheme of union must seek to express not only a harmony of the local and temporary factors, but also – in however defective a form – the unity of that whole new humanity

created in Christ and extending throughout all lands and all ages from his coming until his coming again.

This necessarily raises the questions of order and ministerial continuity. The continuity of the ministry is the normal expression of the unity of the Church through successive generations. When a minister has been set apart by prayer and the laying on of hands by those who have authority in the Church so to do, he is accepted as one whose acts are the acts of the Church. When he presides at the Lord's Table, it is the Table of the whole Church. When he lays hands in the prayer of ordination, it is to the ministry of the whole Church that he ordains. If the Church had not been divided, that would be universally true. All ministers would be accepted
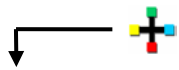
everywhere as having the authority and commission of the whole fellowship. Because of our divisions that is not so. The necessary consequence of every break in the unity of the Church has been that ordinations have followed which were repudiated at least by some. Our ministries do not carry a universally accepted authority.
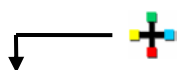
If we are right in saying that the unity which we seek is a unity resting upon what God has done in Christ, it will follow that one aspect of that unity will be a ministry which, so. far as may be, visibly and recognizably carries the authority of the whole fellowship across the continents and across the centuries-not because this is the condition of our standing in God's grace, but because it will be the proper sign and fruit of it.

2. *Secondly*, the unity we seek is a spiritual unity. To quote again from the C. S. I.:

The Church of South India believes that the unity of His Church for which
Christ prayed is a unity in Him and in the Father through the Holy Spirit,
and is therefore fundamentally a reality of the spiritual realm.

The language of our Lord's prayer points to a unity which is not merely analogous to the unity of the divine nature ("as thou, Father, art in me and I in thee") but actually a participation in the being of the triune God ("I in them and thou in me, that they may be perfected into one"). The unity which we must seek is thus -a unity which arises from Christ's indwelling in his people, and from their being in him. It is not simply a unity of organization, nor is it simply an agreement about doctrine. It is a total mutual interchange of being-Christ wholly given to us, we wholly given to him. This is a unity involving the whole being of all concerned in it. It is not of the same kind as any other human unity. Its precondition is the forgiveness of sins – God's forgiveness of us, and our mutual forgiveness of one another. Its character is most simply described by saying that those participate in it who love one another as Christ loved them.

This means that the question of agreement in doctrine is not the only, or even the central question involved in discussions of church union. There is a basic agreement upon a doctrine which is essential to unity. Our participation in Christ depends on our hearing, believing, and accepting in common the message of God's saving acts in him. Without this basic consensus of belief there can be no unity. But the unity in question is not in essence an intellectual agreement about doctrine: it is a total mutual reconciliation which is the result of being, born anew by the Spirit. It is a unity of mutual love given by God. This unity is compatible with a wide variety of forte and emphasis in the statement of doctrine. The variety of doctrinal formu-

lation in the New Testament testifies to this. No one finite human mind is capable of achieving a complete and perfect mental formulation of Christian doctrine. It is only by the interplay of differing human insights within the bonds of one divine charity that an adequate testimony is given to the fullness of the truth as it is in Jesus.

The attempt to achieve over-elaborate and precise formulations of the truth and to impose them as a test of unity leads to schism. It must be granted, on the other hand, that a too lax attitude

to doctrinal aberrations will also lead the Church into sin. But – in relation to schemes of reunion – it is very important to guard against any attempt to demand a too complete and precise statement on all points of doctrine. No rule can be here laid down. It is only possible to point out the dangers on both sides. The living Church has the inescapable responsibility of deciding in each case how much doctrinal agreement is requisite. The Church may make mistakes in this matter and frequently does so. Fortunately the Church does not live by its own correctness but by the mercy of God.

In this connection attention is often drawn to the fact that the prayer, "Sanctify them in the truth" is closely linked to the prayer for unity. This is true. The unity prayed for is not just any sort of togetherness. It is unity in the truth. But the truth is not a series of propositions; it is the Word of

God, made flesh in Jesus. Being sanctified in the truth does not mean – surely – becoming more pure and at the same time more correct in one's doctrine. It means being wholly ruled by and identified with him who is the truth.

3. *Thirdly*, the unity we seek is a visible unity – visible to the world, a sign by which the world may be brought to faith in Christ as the Apostle of God and the Mediator of his love. The question what form this visible unity should take will be discussed later. The simple point for the moment is that the unity which we seek is to be visible.

Many Christians express strong dissent when this prayer of our Lord is quoted in support of the case for schemes of reunion. They claim that these words refer to a purely spiritual unity and that this is something quite different from unity of ecclesiastical organization. There is, however, an increasingly widespread awareness that this spiritualism is alien to the thought of the Bible with its strong emphasis on the corporate character of life in the Spirit. Certainly Christians within one church can be at certain times and places full "of rancor and malice toward each other, and Christians in different churches full of cordiality. But it is surely impossible to deny that mutual love ought normally to express itself in relationships more
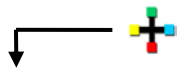
permanent and binding than those of individual friendship. It should lead to mutual commitment and to the acceptance of the obligations of common membership in a society.

But to state the matter in this way is to convey the false suggestion that the unity of the Church is the result of the coming together of individuals or groups moved by separate impulses. The truth is, as has already been stated, that the unity of the Church is something given to it at its inception, and given by its Lord. That unity had its outward form, first in the fact that the first disciples were visibly grouped around one Lord, and then in the close-knit fellowship of the days immediately following Pentecost, in the sharing in a common baptism, a common tradition of teaching, a common Supper, and a common acknowledgment of the leadership of the Apostles. This unity expressed itself at a later stage in the relationship which we see between Paul and his congregations, and between him and his, fellow apostles, and in the way in which the Church dealt with the circumcision controversy.

This visible unity was certainly subject to stresses. It was not a perfect spiritual unity. But it is surely impossible to deny that it belongs to the nature of the Church as willed by our Lord that this visible unity should not be broken; that when it was broken in such a way that the separated members no longer acknowledged each other as brothers, something essentially wrong had happened; and that the unity which our Lord wills for his Church must include that degree of visible unity which the Church had when he first sent it forth into the world.

4. *Fourthly*, the unity which we seek is one into which we have to be perfected, and one which involves the world. "That they may be perfected into one, that the world may know…" The quest for unity is misunderstood if it is thought of in isolation from the fulfillment of God's whole purpose "to unite *all* things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph. 1:10). The Church is both the first-fruit and the instrument of that purpose. Its fulfillment involves the whole

creation, and the perfection of each part must await the perfection of the whole. The unity of the Church is wrongly sought unless it is sought from a missionary point of view – is part of the fulfillment of Christ's promise to draw all men to himself (John 12:32).

The effect of a true union of churches ought to be that those concerned in it learn more of the length and breadth and height and depth of the divine charity; that they are less concerned about preserving particular traditions of practice and piety and more concerned about the whole human
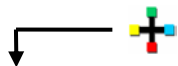
race in its relation to its Savior; that in their corporate Christian life they. have less of the character of a series of particular societies each marked by the idiosyncrasies of certain groups and types of men, and more of the character of a universal society; a re-created human race in which all men of every kind may find their true home; that the Church shows that combination of elasticity with strength, of variety and freedom with unity, which comes when attention is concentrated upon the essentials of God's saving revelation in Christ, and without which the Church cannot be the instrument for reconciling all men to God.

Every plan of union should thus look beyond itself. The aim should not be to produce a nicely finished piece of ecclesiastical joinery. Nothing will be finished until the Lord comes. Till then we must always be looking beyond the existing boundaries of effective Christian fellowship, and seeking to enlarge them both by further acts of reunion and by the unceasing ministry of evangelism.

III

How far do these general principles take us in formulating an answer to the question, "What form of visible structural unity should we aim at?" All that I feel able to do is to suggest an answer in the most general terms, and then to add some negative and positive comments.

Briefly, I suggest that the unity we seek must be a form of church life which ensures that wherever and whenever Christians meet together they should know themselves to be, and should be known to be, one family with the whole family of Christ from the day of Pentecost till today; and that this knowledge of unity should be a matter not only of inner experiences but also of recognizable outward signs.

1. Negatively, I would add two points:

a. The unity we seek does not necessarily mean larger ecclesiastical organizations. It may well mean the opposite. My impression is that sectarianism tends to breed large and tightly organized administrative systems, and that reunion ought to mean a much greater degree of decentralization, and much smaller units of administration. A congregation which is one of ten competing "causes" in a small town feels the need of a big body behind it to support it; when the ten are all parts of one fellowship supporting each other, the need is much less. A local grouping of congregations, by whatever name it is called, provides the necessary range of fellowship.

b. The unity we seek is not federal, if by federation we mean a system by which Christians in the same *place* are not put into a new relation with each other, and therefore do not have to face the real issues of Christian
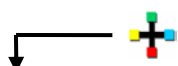
disunity at the level of congregational life and practice. A federation in which the several units have clearly demarcated territorial jurisdictions is one thing. A federation in which there is no such demarcation is quite another. The U.S.A. is an example of the former in the political field, and (with a few admitted anomalies) the Anglican Church is an illustration in the ecclesiastical sphere. A situation in which all the State governments in the U.S.A. were free to compete for the allegiance of all citizens in any part of the country would be a political expression of the second

kind of federation. The ecclesiastical equivalent is what we have now in our national councils of churches. It is not the unity we seek.

2. Positively, two comments may be attempted:

a. The clue to the whole matter lies in the place where Christians actually meet – where they meet for worship, to hear the Word together, to break the Bread together, and to engage together in their common tasks of witness and service. But – and this is crucial – if this common congregational life is not imbedded in their ordinary secular life and work, it will be robbed of its power to change the world. Christian unity ought to mean that neighbors are made brothers. But who is my neighbor? He is the man with whom I have to do. In an Indian village that means – quite simply – the people of the same village, the landlords and the laborers, the potter, the carpenter, the *dhobi*, the barber, the shopkeeper and the rest of them. Christian unity in India must mean that in any village all the Christians are one family, and that their unity is one which consciously aims to embrace the whole village.

But what does "neighborhood" mean in a London suburb, or a New York apartment? Have modern methods of transport and communications so far eliminated space as to make locality an irrelevant ingredient in the idea of neighborhood? Possibly. It may be that modern social structures call for a complete rethinking of the question, "Who is my neighbor?" and that, at least in some societies, the basic unit of the church may have to be not the neighborhood in the old local sense, but the neighborhood in its new sense – the factory, for instance. Personally, I doubt whether we have really reached the point where locality is spiritually irrelevant. In any case, the fundamental principle stands: the unity we seek is one in which neighbors become brothers.

b. It is of the essence of the matter that this brotherhood is *in Christ*, is in some recognizable sense one with the whole company of Christ's people of all places and generations. The visible signs of this will include the acceptance of the Holy Scriptures as the supreme and decisive standard of
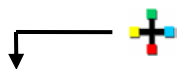
faith, of the ecumenical creeds as witnessing to and safeguarding the Scriptural revelation, and of the dominical sacraments as providing the visible signs, means, and seals of our incorporation in Christ. They must also include a ministry which – in the measure which is possible – carries the authority of the whole Christian fellowship. In none of our present scheme, of reunion is it possible to achieve this completely, but the aim must be to achieve it in the greatest possible measure.

It is in this context, with the declared purpose of seeking a universally acceptable ministry, that in the South India plan of union the historic episcopate is accepted as an essential part of the plan. Exaggerated statements are often made about the importance of episcopacy which call forth equally exaggerated denunciations. There is surely sufficient evidence to prove both that churches without bishops can live for centuries a corporate life marked by a rich endowment of the gifts of the Spirit, and also that churches with bishops can drag out a terribly impoverished and emaciated existence because they have neglected other aspects of the Church's fullness – such as, for instance, a really full and responsible congregational life. Those of us who have come into the Church of South India from nonepiscopal traditions would commend to their brethren the acceptance of the historic episcopate as a part of any plan for the reunion of Christendom as a whole – not for the (untenable) reason that episcopacy is essential to the existence of the Church, but for the reason that any true reunion of Christendom as a whole must involve as one of its elements the recovery of a ministry which carries the authority of the whole Church and which visibly links each local cell of the, brotherhood to the whole Body.