



Unity And Mission

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J.E. Lesslie Newbigin

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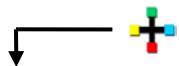
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In a South Indian village a visit from the bishop is quite a public occasion. He is met at a convenient spot two or three hundred yards from the edge of the village by an official deputation of the elders of the church. There are garlands of flowers, trays of fruit, and other tokens of greeting. There will be a band and a choir, or possibly two choirs singing different lyrics at the same time. Just in case there should be any moments of silence, there will also be fireworks.

The entire body will then form into a procession, singing as they go, and letting off a rocket every few yards. Soon they will be pushing their way through the narrow streets, and by the time the procession has reached the church, most of the inhabitants of the village will have turned' out to see what is happening. At this point it is quite probable that the bishop will be asked to say something to the non-Christians before going into the church for the Christian service.

And so it has often happened that I have found myself standing on the steps of a village church, opening the Scriptures to preach the Gospel to a great circle of Hindus and Moslems standing round, while the Christian congregation sits in the middle. When I do that, I always know one thing: the words which I speak will only carry weight if those who hear them can see that they are being proved true in the life of the congregation which sits in the middle. When I hold up Christ as the Savior of all men, and repeat his promise, "I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto myself," I know that my hearers are only likely to believe this promise if they can see in fact that the Savior of the world is drawing men of all sorts into one family.



If they can see in the congregation in the center not a new clique, or a new caste, or a new party, but a family in which men and women of all cliques and castes and parties are being drawn in mutual forgiveness and reconciliation to live a life which is rooted in peace with God, then there is a possibility that they may believe. If, on the other hand, they see only a series of rival groups competing with one another for influence and membership, they are not likely to be

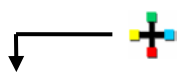
impressed by the message of our Savior.

That common village scene is a true parable of the position of the Church in the world. Modern means of communication have shrunk our world to the dimensions of a village. There is no longer any separation of races and 'cultures. We all jostle and push one another in every part of the globe. The Church of Jesus Christ is the congregation set in the midst of the world as the first-fruit, the sign, and the instrument of Christ's purpose to draw all men to himself. It is not a segregation but a congregation – the visible form of the action of Christ in drawing to himself the scattered and estranged children of God to make them one house. hold under one Father.

With every year that passes it becomes more urgent that the Church throughout the world should be recognizable to ordinary men as one household, a family of those who, having been re-born as children of God, are content to live together as brethren. It becomes more and more urgent that Christian people should make their own the prayer of our Lord for us: "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.*"

This prayer, "that the world may know," is the true center of the concern for unity. As a matter of historic fact, the modern movement towards Christian unity is a product of the great foreign missionary movement of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. So long as Christendom was almost entirely confined to Europe, the energies of Christians were to a very large extent engaged in the struggle between differing beliefs about the nature of Christianity. But when that isolation was ended and Christians began again to remember Christ's promise to draw all men to himself, and began to go to the ends of the earth as his ambassadors, their perspective began to change.

Differences were still deep, but they were seen in a new light – in the light of the much vaster difference between being in Christ and being without Christ. In that new situation the name



of Jesus came to mean more, and the other names that Christians have taken to themselves to mean less. Missionaries of widely different confessions began to regard each other as colleagues and not as rivals. Comity, conference, and co-operation became common practice on the mission fields. And in due course this had its effect upon the sending churches.

William Carey had dreamed of a world missionary conference in 1800. It was not until half a century later that such a conference was held, but then it was followed by others, and most notably by the World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh in 1910 which is commonly regarded as the birthplace of the modern ecumenical movement. The missionary passion, the longing that the world might know Jesus as its Savior, led directly to the longing for unity.

The health of the ecumenical movement depends upon the vigor and freshness of the missionary passion from which it sprang. Certainly the forms and patterns of the Church's missionary work have changed, and will change more. We are in a different world from the world of Ziegenbalg, Carey, and Livingstone. The word "missionary" in the years ahead of us is going to conjure up a picture different from the nineteenth-century one with which we are familiar. A big place in that picture will be taken by the missionaries of the Asian and African churches, and by men and women who are not the paid agents of a missionary society but servants of Christ in secular employment.

But the missionary passion, the longing that "the world may know," must remain central to the ecumenical movement. The very word "ecumenical" should remind us of that. It is a word which derives its meaning from the world, not from the Church. It should bring to every one who hears it a picture, not primarily of inter-church discussions, but of the going out of the Gospel to the ends of the earth and the gathering together in Christ of all tribes and nations of men.

Of that true understanding of the word "ecumenical" the forthcoming Assembly of the World Council of Churches and the International Missionary Council at New Delhi will surely be a potent symbol. Its theme, "Jesus Christ, the Light of the World," is a reminder to all who have

any part in it that our concern is with a gospel for all men. Its place at the capital city of India will make it impossible for the delegates to evade the challenge to a faith of the great non-Christian systems of life.

And the fact that it will be the occasion of the uniting of these

two world bodies in one, so that from thenceforth the World Council of Churches will itself carry the direct responsibility for missionary counsel and co-operation which the International Missionary Council has carried for half a century, will surely mean in the end that all the churches will have to take this missionary responsibility much more deeply to heart than they have done hitherto, will have to learn that to be a Christian congregation anywhere is to be a part of a mission which reaches out to the ends of the earth.

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