



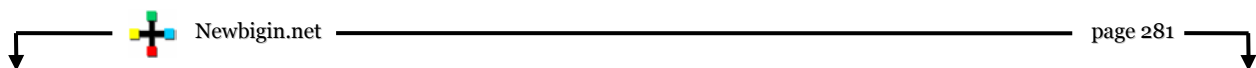
## Anglicans, Methodists and Intercommunion: A Moment for Decision

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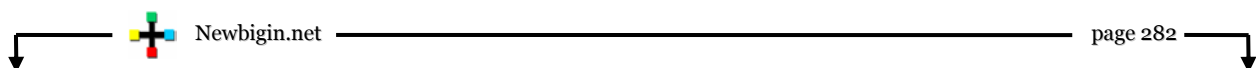
J.E. Lesslie Newbigin

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I have been invited by the Editor to comment upon the present plans for Anglican-Methodist reconciliation, especially in the light of the *Report-Intercommunion Today* and of the book *Fellowship in the Gospel* by Dr. J. I. Packer and others. I gratefully accept this invitation. It is obvious that the Anglican-Methodist proposals are of immense interest to Christians everywhere, and very specially to Christians in South India who have often expressed the longing that their parent bodies might find their way to unity. It is also obvious that an observer from the Church of South India is sympathetic to the powerful arguments which Dr. Packer and others have advanced in support of the South India plan of union as preferable to what is now proposed in England. Many of us in the Church of South India have felt that the Lambeth Conferences of 1948 and 1958 would have been wise to give greater weight to the experience of South India as a possible guide to unity elsewhere and have regretted that such exclusive endorsement was given to methods of union which depended on other principles. It is therefore natural that I have followed the arguments of Dr. Packer and his colleagues, both in the present book and in the earlier volume entitled *All in Each Place* with the deepest sympathy. At the same time, however, and after weighing these arguments with as much care as I could, I have come to feel that I could not endorse the advice which is given in the present book that



Anglicans should decline to accept the Scheme proposed by the Anglican-Methodist Unity Commission. I would like very respectfully to put forward the following arguments for this conclusion.

1. The first point made by Dr. Packer is that the Report 'is rooted in a bygone era of thought'. This is perfectly true. The whole report rests upon its original foundation, which is the proposal made by Archbishop Fisher that other Churches 'should take episcopacy into their system'. This was in itself part of a whole way of thinking about the Church and the Ministry which has been rendered out-of-date by later theological development. It is not difficult to show

that this is so. But it must also be said that, if the present scheme were to be scrapped and a new one planned on the basis of recent thinking on the doctrine of the Church, by the time it was ready for ecclesiastical action it would be theologically out-of-date. The South India Scheme was drafted in the early 1920's. By the time final voting was required it was theologically out-of-date. There were vehement critics of the Scheme in the 1940's who made this one of their chief points of attack. All the essential parts of the Scheme were written long before the revival of biblical theology had touched the Church in India. One might almost venture to formulate the following law: all schemes of union are theologically out-of-date at the time when they are ecclesiastically practicable. Unless theological fashions become more static, and ecclesiastical assemblies more dynamic (neither of which seems at the moment to be likely) one must expect that this law will continue to operate.

The point, however, is that a scheme of union which is theologically out-of-date need not prevent the united Church from developing its own vigorous theological thinking. The scheme is simply a starting point, a minimum basis for starting to live together. It need not be a limitation on further development.

2. From the point of view of an observer in the Church of South India, the part of the Scheme which is most open to criticism is the proposed service of reconciliation. It is well known that analogous proposals were twice made and rejected in the course of the twenty-seven years of negotiations in South India. In the North India Plan, in which similar proposals were originally a part, these were abandoned in favour of a service within the united Church in which the grace of God will be sought for all the ministers of the one Church. In the present Scheme the service will be a joint reciprocal action by two separate Churches which are not yet in a position to unite. Moreover there is an important difference in wording between the prayers used in the two corresponding parts of the service, apparently indicating that the grace which is sought for Methodist ministers is different from that sought for Anglicans.

However I would urge that the following points should also be considered:

(a) While one could have wished that such a service should be – as in the North India Plan – an act of the united Church rather than of two separate Churches, it is important that the service itself contains a very solemn pledge to unite, a pledge which surely cannot be entered into without the full intention on both sides to honour it. It will be

the business of all who are rightly concerned about the impropriety of such a service divorced from organic union to see that the pledge is honoured with all due urgency.

(b) It has always seemed to me that one's judgment of the service must depend upon the relation of it to the practice of intercommunion between the two Churches. If acceptance of the service of reconciliation were made the absolute pre-condition of eucharistic fellowship between the two Churches, then one would have to say that the view that the service conveys episcopal ordination to Methodist ministers was the only possible view of the service, and that statements of agnosticism regarding the meaning of the rite must simply be disbelieved. But if the service takes place *within* a growing eucharistic fellowship then the situation is quite different. In that case one can accept the statement of the Commission that the proposed arrangement 'does not foreclose the theological issue . . . between those who hold that the normative character of episcopal ordination admits of no exception, and those who believe that circumstances may justify or necessitate ordination in other ways than by bishops' (Scheme, p. 127). On the basis of recent developments in Anglican teaching about intercommunion, and especially of the recent action of the Lambeth Conference on this matter, one can surely feel justified in taking this latter position.

(c) The terms of the 'Declaration' (Scheme p. 147) to be made by every minister who takes part in the services of reconciliation are such as to make it impossible for anyone to hold thereafter that such participation implies a denial of the reality of the previous ordination as 'ordination to the ministry of the Word and Sacraments in the Church of God'.

(d) There is a clear statement that the services of reconciliation 'are not intended to establish a norm of procedure'. No commitment is implied that the same procedure would have to be followed in subsequent acts of union or reconciliation. This seems to remove one of the most serious practical difficulties which critics have noticed.

(e) I am bound to confess that, even when all these points are borne in mind, I find this method of procedure much less satisfactory from a theological point of view than the one adopted in South India. But it has to be accepted as a fact of history that the South India method has been judged by responsible churchmen in England to be inapplicable to the situation here. While it is conceivably possible that, over a period of years, a majority of churchmen might be persuaded otherwise, this would mean the postponement of any possibility of union for a very long time. I think that this would only be justifiable if it could be shown that participation in the proposed services of reconciliation involves necessarily the acceptance of theologically intolerable positions. In the light of a careful study of the documents, and of the points made above, I do not believe that any churchman need feel that this would be so. Perhaps I may be allowed to put the point in the following way.

I believe that those churchmen who think that episcopal ordination is the indispensable precondition of valid sacraments are wrong. An act which implied necessarily that I accepted this belief would be

for me theologically intolerable. But I hold those who do so believe as my fellow Christians and I should think it intolerable to break communion with them on account of this difference. The same is presumably true of those evangelical Anglicans who hold the same belief as I do at this point, but who remain in communion with their fellow-Anglicans who do not. Dr. Packer's preface to the volume under review seems to imply – and I ask forgiveness if I have misunderstood him – that the moment has now come when this co-existence of incompatible views should be ended. I do not agree with this. I think rather that those Anglicans who believe as I do on this point should recognise this as an opportunity for charity towards those who seem to us to have an inadequate grasp of the greatness of God's grace. Provided it is clear (as I think it is) that acceptance of the Scheme does not commit anyone to the belief that episcopal ordination is indispensable, those who believe as I do on this point should be ready to go forward trusting in the intrinsic power of the truth which they hold.

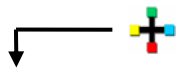
3. One of the crucial points under discussion has been the question whether the united Church which is envisaged at the end of Stage One will be in full communion with those Churches with which the Methodist Church now has full communion. The Commission says: 'We are convinced that as our two Churches move forward into Stage One, they should do so with the firm and declared intention that ways shall be found by which at Stage Two no relations at present maintained by either Church will be broken'. This commitment is plainly quite essential, and one may accept it as adequate. It is true that there are unsolved problems ahead. It is not yet clear how this intention can be carried out. But it seems proper to make two remarks.

(a) It will never be possible to see in advance the solution to all our problems. The South India Scheme contained a similar element of uncertainty in that it was impossible to state in 1947, how the united Church would in 1977 solve the problem of the terms of admission of ministers from other Churches while maintaining both the principle of episcopal ordination and the principle of communion with all the parent Churches. In a matter of this kind one can only go forward in faith and with a firm declaration of intention.

(b) There is, however, one factor which ought to make the problem less insoluble than it seems now. This factor is the progress of unity negotiations in other parts of the world. A study of the information given in the documents prepared for the Lambeth Conference regarding the unity negotiations in which the various provinces of the Anglican Communion are now engaged gives

ground for hope that, by the time the two Churches in England are ready for Stage Two, the problem may be much less intractable than it now seems.

4. The Commission has been at pains to deal in detail with the matters of doctrine on which clarification has been sought by both Churches. Obviously not everyone will be satisfied, and it is always natural to look for safeguards at the moment when one is being asked for a final commitment. But the truth must be faced that written safeguards have a very limited value in preserving the faith of the Church. It is certainly necessary that all questions should be frankly



faced, and the range of variation in belief made clear. But in the last analysis the faith of the united Church will depend upon the intellectual vigour and spiritual integrity of its pastors, teachers and prophets. I think most of my fellow-members in the CSI would agree with me that the doctrinal development of that Church since 1947 has depended very little upon reference to the doctrinal statements enshrined in the Basis, and still less upon the numerical proportions of the various uniting Churches. Everything depends, under God, upon the vigour with which one faces new situations as they come and the fidelity with which one tries to follow Christ in new circumstances. It is not wise for evangelicals, or for any others, to put too much trust in verbal safeguards. Even the most impressive of them can become something of a Maginot Line.

5. The proposals which have been developed by the Anglican-Methodist Commission, and which are now before the two Churches, are surely not perfect. But it is upon them that decision has now to be made. It seems almost certain that, if the present Scheme is rejected the whole matter of union between the two Churches will be postponed for a long time-perhaps for a generation. The repercussions of this upon the related Churches all over the world would be momentous. There are moments given to us which do not return. I personally think that such a moment occurred when the Lambeth Conference of 1948 was invited to define its attitude to the recently accomplished union of Churches in South India. I believe that if the Lambeth Fathers of that day had had the courage to take the same generous and positive attitude to South India that has characterised later Anglican decisions, the whole subsequent history of reunion would have been different. That opportunity was lost. I have much sympathy with those who feel that the present Scheme is defective and who would like to see it bettered. But I think that this is the moment when decision has to be made. And, if I may quote the words used by the joint Committee in South India when a similar point had been reached in the negotiations there, I would 'affectionately urge' those who would like to see the Scheme further amended, that the time has now come for decision. Whatever be the defects in the present Scheme, a decision by the two Churches now to go forward on this basis, would liberate new forces of faith and hope for the Church throughout the world.

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