



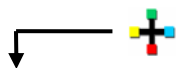
Church Union: Which Way Forward?

1969

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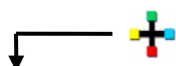
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One of the first actions of the first Synod of the Church of South India in January 1948 was to invite the other Protestant Churches in South India to join in conversation regarding, 'wider union'. The Federation, of Evangelical Lutheran Churches, the Samavesan of Telugu Baptist Churches and the Council of Baptist Churches of the Northern Circars responded to the invitation. Two very fruitful meetings were held which issued agreed statements on the matters discussed. After this hopeful beginning the Baptist Churches withdrew from the discussions and there ensued a series of meetings between the representatives of the C.S.I. and the Federation of Evangelical Lutheran Churches. These discussions explored in depth the matters of theological agreement and disagreement between the two bodies. The results of these are embodied in a volume of 'Agreed Statements'.

In 1959 the Churches agreed that the time had come to move from conversation to negotiation. A Joint Commission was set up which has now had nine meetings. As the result of this labour there have been produced a, common catechism, a statement of faith and the first draft of a constitution for a united church. These are now before the churches for their study.

In these long discussions, the two issues which have proved most difficult have been the preparation of the Statement of Faith, and the handling of, the question of the historic episcopate. With regard to the former, I believe that our discussions have been mutually helpful, and that all of us have been able to learn something from the others. I believe that the Statement of Faith as now proposed represents convictions genuinely shared and not

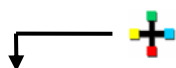


merely cleverly drafted compromises. However, in working on such statements, I have always at the back of my mind the nagging question: What is the real role of such a statement in the practical life of the Church? It is horribly easy to reach unanimity over a verbal formula and to

ignore the fact that the daily life of the churches is shaped by quite other forces. We are living in a time when the churches will be judged much more by their deeds than by their credal affirmations.

The question of the historic episcopate has been much the most intractable subject of discussion. The C.S.I. delegates have laboured over a period of 20 years to explain to the Lutheran delegates what they do and what they do not mean by insistence on this point. The Draft Constitution does not use the phrase at any point, but I believe that it embodies the thing which the phrase is intended to denote. What is this thing? I can try to put it this way: the Church is a body which must both look back and look forward. On the one hand it looks back to utterly depend upon that which was done once for all in Jesus Christ: In order to be authentically the Church it must be able to show that it is indeed the body created and sent forth into the world by Jesus Christ, and nothing else. On the other hand the Church looks forward – to that event which is described in the New Testament as Christ's return in glory. It looks forward to a consummation which is far beyond our capacity to describe or imagine but which in some way completes that whole work which God began on the first day of creation. This means that the Church must be constantly open to the future, ready for new things, new understandings of the Faith, new forms of obedience, new structures of togetherness. If one of these two is over-emphasized the Church becomes fossilized and loses its power to witness; if the other, the Church loses its direction and is in danger of losing its identity among the forces that operate in the secular world. The Church is both something given to us by God, and also something which is constantly being reformed and renewed through the daily acts of adventurous obedience of its members facing ever new situations.

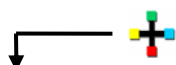
If this is true, it becomes very important to know what are the elements, through which the 'given-ness' of the Church is established and recognized. In answer to this question, the Protestant tradition has emphasized almost exclusively the Word and the



Sacraments. In fact powerful elements in the Protestant tradition have given the Word of God in Scripture the almost exclusive emphasis as the locus of 'given-ness' in the life of the Church. The danger of this is that it separates things which in fact are part of one organic whole. The Word is not first of all something printed and bound in a book. It is first the living Word, Jesus Himself, and then the living Word spoken in the midst of the congregation where two or three are gathered in His name. It is the Word ministered through God's living servants - teachers, preachers, parents. And the sacraments are not entities let down from heaven apart from human ministry. They exist only as ministered to God's people in the midst of the congregation. For this reason the Catholic and Orthodox traditions in Christendom (with somewhat different emphasis) have insisted that the locus of the 'given-ness' of the Church is to be found not in Word and Sacraments in isolation, but in these as ministered in an unbroken succession of ministerial obedience, within the life of the congregation. The Catholic tradition would hold that, if we are faithful to the New Testament, we shall see that this is the true understanding of the way in which Jesus intended to be present with his people during the days between His coming and His coming again. It is clear that this Catholic emphasis can be used to justify doctrines and practices which deny plain spiritual realities. Nevertheless throughout these long discussions the C.S.I. delegates have been unable to abandon the conviction that there is a reality here which must find its expression in any true reunion of the divided churches.

As I reflect upon these discussions, and upon the future of the movement for reunion, I confess that I very frequently think of a remark made on the subject some years ago by - I think - Eric

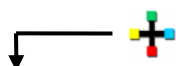
Mascall. He said something to this effect. The trouble about such discussions is that they concentrate on the matters on which the churches disagree - about which at least some of them might be right, they tend to ignore the matters on which the churches agree about which they might all be wrong. I fear that one of the things about which we may all be wrong is the matter of the size and character of the fundamental unit of church life. As I read the New Testament it seems to me clear that the kind of groups to which - for example the letters of Paul were addressed, were small enough and intimate enough to enable the



members to take a real responsibility for one another. The language which is used simply cannot be applied to a congregation of 1000 people, who rarely meet each other, hardly know each other, and certainly cannot take the sort of pastoral responsibility for one another that the language of the New Testament implies. I am sure that one of the main reasons for which people leave the 'main-line' churches to join what we are pleased to call 'sects' is that they long for a warmer and more intimate fellowship than what they find in the big churches. Yet when church officials get together to discuss their problems one finds a constant tendency to move yet further in the direction of tight, large-scale organization. The deplorable habit of taking church disputes to the law-courts has accentuated this tendency, for it becomes necessary to take important ecclesiastical decisions in a way which will be accepted as correct in secular organizations, and therefore to seek legal advice about procedure. I believe that, if our progress towards unity is not to be self-defeating, we must, do much more than has yet been done to strengthen the small informal groups of believers who meet regularly to build one another up in the faith. This could be done without trying to destroy the existing structures. The more we can strengthen this kind of intimate, local, caring fellowship in the life of the churches, the more shall we find that our larger structures are delivered from their rigidity and brittleness and can become flexible means to ensure the widest possible unity of fellowship and action.

I think that the small groups which we need must be of two kinds - neighbourhood groups and work groups. The first would provide opportunities for Christians living in the same neighbourhood, in the same street or quarter of a town, to meet together for bible study, prayer and fellowship. The second would provide similar opportunities for those working in the same office or factory, or drawn together by a common commitment to work at some social or political task.

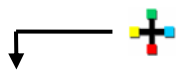
Very fruitful examples of the working of neighbourhood groups can be drawn from the experience of the church in many parts of the world. The famous East Harlem Protestant Parish draws a very great part of its strength from the small groups in each neighbourhood which meet on a week-day to study the passage from which the Minister will preach on the following Sunday. Attendance at these groups is considered so important that those



who fail to attend are removed from the Church membership. The old Reformed Church in the Indonesian city of Bogor was completely revolutionised under the ministry of the Rev Dick Maitimoe through the development of neighbourhood groups which met together weekly to consider, on the basis of bible study and prayer, the job they had to do in their sector of the city. Such groups, to which of course non-Christian neighbours should always be invited, provide an opportunity to take responsibility for one another and for our neighbourhood as a whole and thus to fulfil the basic law of God in its most elementary sense - to love one's neighbour as oneself.

Groups of Christians working in the same office or factory are already quite a common thing, for which one should be thankful. However in my experience these groups tend to develop an excessively introverted kind of pietism. In other words they tend to concern themselves exclusively with the private spiritual life of the participants and to avoid the difficult questions about how to do God's will in the office or factory where they work. To raise these questions would inevitably create differences of opinion, and those who make up these groups are tempted to stay in safer, if shallower waters. If such work groups are to fulfill their function as cells in the body of Christ, they must be bold enough to tackle the really difficult questions about how the will of God is to be done in the work of the office or factory or political programme in which their members are involved.

Groups of this kind, whether neighbourhood groups or work groups, already exist. In the form of 'cottage prayer meetings' an embryonic form of the neighbourhood group exists in many churches. What is needed is to take them much more seriously, to broaden them to include *all* the Christians in the neighbourhood or the office (not only those of one denomination), and to apply to them in practice the things we believe about the nature and function of the one holy Catholic and apostolic Church. They should not be regarded as secondary forms of Church life, as 'para-churches' - to use a phrase which has often been used in this connection. It should be recognized that they have, in certain circumstances, at least as much right to the name of 'Church' as the larger bodies which gather together typically in a Church building on Sunday morning. The implication of this would be that through the development of a volunteer non-professional

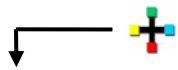


ministry such groups would come to have a full congregational and sacramental life - always within the wider fellowship of the big congregation.

I believe that the way towards union is to be found not only by seeking to integrate the large ecclesiastical structures which we call denominations, but also - and perhaps this is more fundamental - by the formation and growth of small groups through which Christians in one place can be committed to one another in a common commitment to the Lord through mission, prayer, bible-study and fellowship. But the growth of such groups cannot go beyond a certain point unless the big issues of faith and order which divide the great Christian traditions are tackled. This work of 'top-level' study and negotiation must go on. But the real substance of a re-united Christendom will be in these small loosely knit local fellowships.

How loosely knit? What kind of organization do we need beyond the local group? On the one hand the proper freedom and autonomy of the local group must be safeguarded. Where two or three are gathered together in Christ's name there is something which cannot merely be ordered around from outside. But there must be visible bands of fellowship, and there must be organs by which the Church can act in matters which go beyond the range of a local group - in ministry to industry, in urban renewal, in literature, in the training of various kinds of worker and in many other ways. In this fast moving world, where the human situation is changing every month, the Church needs means for swift action. The democratic processes, which moves with the slowness of a glacier, through an endless hierarchy of committees and councils, simply will not do for the church militant in the second half of the 20th century. We need a type of order which will give to a chosen leader the freedom to initiate new kinds of action quickly, within the context of wider discussion, yet in such a way that power does not become concentrated for too long in the hands of too few. I wonder whether we have not now to consider the possibility of having bishops with a lot of freedom to initiate, but a limited term of office. In general, I plead that we discuss these

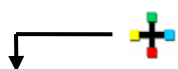
questions not from the point of view of the ancient controversies about episcopacy and presbytery and congregation, but from the point of view of the function which the Church has to exercise in India today - always in the light of a biblical and



catholic understanding of the nature of the Church itself. If we, could adopt this point of view, we might even find that Rome could teach us a thing or two about flexible forms of organization to meet new situations.

What about Rome? No one can discuss unity questions today without raising that question, and when it is raised many Protestants find it difficult to think calmly, They are either fascinated or terrified - or both, Fortunately there is an increasing number of Protestants who are finding opportunities for brotherly conversation with Roman Catholic friends, and out of such, conversation we begin to discover that all our churches face similar problems and that we are deeply in need of the renewal and reformation which only the Holy Spirit can give. The question of organic Union between Protestant and Roman Catholic Churches is not on the agenda at present and will not be for many years. The doctrinal differences which divide us are still very great and will need much patient exploration in years to come. But Rome is now a full partner in the ecumenical dialogue, and even in our inter-protestant discussions it would help us to have Roman Catholic observers participating. Their presence could save us from many mistakes and could help to put our thinking in a broader perspective.

But in our excitement about the new relations with Roman Catholics, we ought not to forget the equally ancient, vital and relevant Orthodox tradition, as it is represented in our own country. The Orthodox Church is the ancient church of India; the rest of us are all late-comers. There is a far-reaching revival of Orthodox theology which will require Protestants to take it much more seriously than has been common in the past. It is unthinkable that the united Church of India for which we long should be something separate from the Orthodox Church. Yet it must be recognized that the difficulties in the way of deep-going theological discussion with the Orthodox are much greater than those, which arise in discussions between Protestants and Roman Catholics. The division at the Reformation was an internal domestic quarrel, within the Western Church. However much we may disagree, we are talking about the same things and in largely the same way. The Orthodox tradition, with its incomparable history of continued worship, prayer, reflection and endurance, has come to see things in a very different way, and it takes time to establish



real understanding between those who have been separated by so many centuries. It is a matter for great joy that a joint study group has been formed of representatives of the Syrian Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Bishop's Conference and the National Christian Council, to work together on questions of faith and order. This will be a slow and unspectacular work, but I am sure it will be fruitful.

The things which divide us sometimes seem very formidable. But they pale into insignificance compared to what we have in common in our Lord Jesus Christ. It is when we draw close to Him that we find our divisions intolerable. I am troubled by the sense that the will to unity is not as great as it was. If that is so, it is because we are not living close enough to Jesus. I think that the will to unity will be renewed when we commit ourselves locally, in the places where we are,

through the small groups of which I have spoken, to common discipleship and mission in the name of our common Lord.

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