

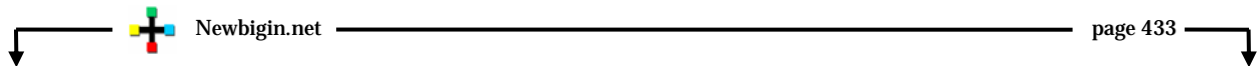


Faith and Order in India Now

J.E. Lesslie Newbigin

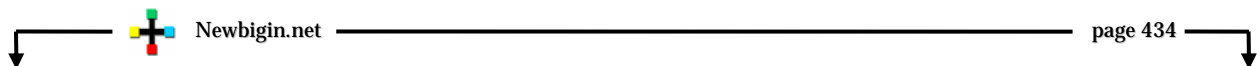
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Four major streams have flowed together to form the modern ecumenical movement. The first was the impulse for co-operation in mission, which found notable expression in India. The long series of decennial missionary conferences in Madras provided some of the inspiration for the Edinburgh Conference of 1910 which is usually regarded as the beginning of the modern organized ecumenical movement. The second tributary stream was the concern to make Christianity relevant to the international and social problems of the modern world. The great leader in this field was Nathan Soderblom of Uppsala and the 'founding meeting' was the Stockholm Conference of 1925. The third stream was the longing that the churches themselves might overcome their deep differences in faith and order, so that the world might be able to see one visible fellowship embodying the presence of Christ in the world. The last was the movement for inter-church aid, which had its origins after the First World War but became a mighty stream during the period of reconstruction after 1945.

Among these four elements, the one which enjoys least prestige at the present moment is the one usually called 'Faith and Order'. To those who care about the ecumenical movement, Christian social action, cooperation in mission and inter-church aid all seem highly relevant and challenging matters. But the slow, laborious and sometimes painful work, of bringing about the organic unity of the churches evokes much less enthusiasm. There are several reasons for this. Some will say: 'The main duty of a believer is to preach the Gospel, win others for Christ and make them also soul-winners. Organizational unity is a secondary matter. It may even be an obstacle if it causes energies to be diverted into internal church problems instead of being concentrated on the great evangelistic task'. Another group will say: 'What matters is effective Christian action in the world. God's will is to be done in the secular world; the hungry must be fed, the sick healed and: the oppressed set free. It does not matter

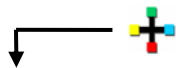


who does this - whether one Church or many churches or any organization of Christians, Hindus, Marxists or humanists. The one thing that matters is that these things should be done.

Ecclesiastical joinery is a secondary matter which can wait till later'. Apart from these definite points of view, there is a general nausea about the church which is widespread in Christian circles. Even churchmen seem to enjoy themselves in publishing cynical and defeatist talk about the many failures of the Church, and think that by doing so they are earning for themselves the right to the adjective 'prophetic'. St Paul often said that the most important duty was to edify the Church - that is to say, to do and say those things which will 'build up' the Church as a strong and united body. But this is not a popular idea at present.

I believe that this fashion of thought will pass away. The building up of the Church in that abiding love which expresses itself in visible unity remains central in the concerns of anyone who takes the New Testament seriously. Those who think that Church unity is irrelevant to evangelism must ask themselves what kind, of evangelism they are doing. Real evangelism must have as its fruit not a litter of splintered sects but a body which is recognizable as the body of Christ. Those who put 'spiritual unity' over against 'visible unity' are using the word 'spiritual' in a way which is pagan and not biblical. One Body and One Spirit are inseparable for the thinking of St Paul, and the reason is not far to seek. For believers to be made sharers in one Spirit is to be bound together in one body. When we use the word 'spiritual' to describe a unity which falls short of full commitment in love, we are speaking of another spirit. The Holy Spirit of God, when He possesses a man's heart, leads him into a full and unreserved commitment to his fellow believer. When a man and woman who have quarrelled and separated tell me that they are still spiritually united, I am not impressed. I will believe them, when I see them living together again.

Similarly those who set social action against 'ecclesiastical joinery', must ask themselves what exactly they are doing. The Gospel does commit us to social action (including the political actions which are necessary for social justice),-but the Gospel is much more than a commitment to social action. The Gospel is also good news of a liberation, a reconciliation, a healing already

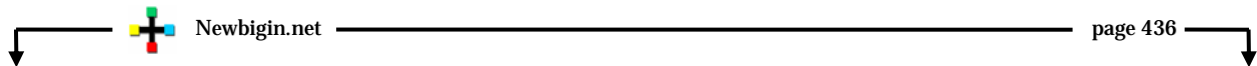


achieved. And the good news becomes credible only when it is carried by a fellowship in which men can taste and enjoy already (even if only in foretaste) that liberation, that reconciliation, that healing. Without this, Christian social action becomes law without gospel. It leads inevitably to that kind of strident shouting for violent revolution which is a cover for inner despair and defeat. The Church's social action will be recognizable as part of her good news only if it is carried by a fellowship in which men find that they can already live together in a love which leaps over the barriers of caste, class and culture.

'Faith and Order' is, the convenient label given to those efforts of study, prayer and discussion by which we try to overcome the deep differences which divide our churches from one another, so that they may recover their visible unity. It is necessarily slow and difficult work. The wounds to be healed are very ancient. They have been opened again and again by fresh misunderstandings. The feelings on both sides of the various conflicts are deep and strong - bound up as they are with men's deepest convictions for which good men have given their lives. And yet, as one who has shared in such work over a considerable number of years, I would give my testimony that this slow and difficult work is deeply rewarding. If we are only willing to hear Christ speak to us through those who think exactly as we do, we shall miss the fulness of His truth. It is when we are willing to listen humbly to those who (no less faithful to Christ than we are) understand Him in a different way, that our own understanding is deepened and enlarged. St Paul said that, in order to know the length and, breadth and height and depth of the love of God, we need the fellowship of all the saints. In our separated groups we do not and cannot know all the fulness of that love. We need one another in order to grow into the fulness of Christ. The 'ecumenical mainline protestant'

- if I may describe ourselves in this ugly jargon - needs the Orthodox, the Catholic and the Pentecostal if he is to grow into the fulness of God. That is why the work of 'Faith and Order' cannot be left undone.

In the strange providence and mercy of God, the Church in this sub-continent has been permitted to go farther than any other part of the universal Church in the quest for visible unity. (Perhaps God chose us for this just because we quarrel so much!)



The churches of Pakistan, North India and South India embody a breadth of unity not approached anywhere else. This gives us a very special responsibility. We have to go forward without growing weary in the way God has called us. The call now, I believe, is to seek together - Protestant, Orthodox, Catholic and Pentecostal, a still broader and deeper unity. It is in this context that the meeting at Nasrapur in August of this year has real significance. The written results of the meeting are not perhaps very impressive. In some matters (such as Mariology) they record much more disagreement than agreement. But that should not discourage us. We are at the beginning of a long journey. We are seeking to bridge chasms of misunderstanding which have been open for nearly 15 centuries. It is not to be expected that agreement can come quickly. What does matter is that we could meet together for a full week in the most intimate fellowship, praying together, sharing (so far as our church rules allow) in each other's worship, and speaking with the utmost honesty and frankness about our differences. I am sure that the Holy Spirit was with us, binding us together, and that the relations between our churches cannot be the same again.

We cannot say exactly how God will lead us. But I am sure that God has called us in India; to continue faithfully and patiently to explore the way towards full and committed unity within one body - a unity in which the world may recognize the presence of Christ himself.

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