

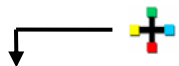


'... But What Kind of Unity?'

J. E. Lesslie Newbigin

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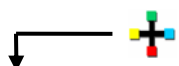
Everyone knows that the World Council of Churches is concerned with Christian unity, but not many agree about just what 'unity' means: The delegates of the 271 member churches will have this question among the many others with which they wrestle when they meet for the Fifth Assembly at Nairobi.

What kind of unity are we talking about? Is it that we all return to the bosom of 'Mother Church'—in Rome, Jerusalem or wherever? Is it a sort of federation of globally organised denominations? Is it one standard-type congregation in every place? Or is it a 'spiritual unity' in which we are polite to each other but go our separate ways?

The World Council has been from the beginning a place where different ideas about unity have met in eager discussion. At the Third Assembly in New Delhi (1961) a first effort was made to give a rather precise picture of the goal: it spoke of all who bear the Name of Christ living in a fully committed fellowship in each place, yet in such a way that this fellowship was recognizable as one throughout the world and throughout the centuries.

The following decade was marked by the new initiatives generated by the Second Vatican Council. The non-Roman churches, generally organised on a national basis, had been much concerned with unity within each nation. In fact, more than 60 unions of churches of this type have taken place during the past 50 years bringing several millions of Christians into united churches - such as the Church of South India with 1.7 million members.

The Vatican Council, at which the non-Roman churches were represented through persons appointed by the world-wide organisations of Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican and other churches,



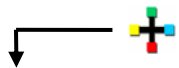
shifted the emphasis towards the trans-national discussion of major theological issues between the denominations. A whole series of such discussions has produced a number of important doctrinal agreements among the churches. It began to look as if unity might be conceived as the co-existence of a variety of 'Christian types' on a world scale.

The 1960's also brought a strong shift of emphasis towards the Church's responsibility for the world. The ecumenical movement had been born out of a concern for the world - for world missions and for the promotion of international peace and social justice. But the 'Development Decade', with its massive hopes and its still more massive disappointments, could not fail to influence the course of the discussion. By the time of the 'Fourth Assembly at Uppsala (1968)' there was a strong insistence that Church unity could only be rightly discussed in the context of a concern for the unity of mankind. Ecclesiastical joinery for its own sake was not 'on'. The Church must be seen (as the Vatican Council put it) as 'a kind of sacrament or sign of the unity of mankind'.

Against this complex and changing background the delegates at Nairobi will make a further effort to clarify the vision of the unity we seek. Section II will address itself to four fundamental questions which are put against the idea that the Church can be 'a sign of the coming unity of mankind'. Is the idea of Church unity compatible with (a) commitment to the struggle for justice? (b) respect for varying racial and cultural identities? (c) concern for personal authenticity and spiritual integrity? (d) faithfulness to the historic confessional traditions?

### **The Struggle for Justice**

This question is put most sharply by the Latin Americans. Dr Jose Miguez-Bonino of Buenos Aires, for example, insists that Christians in Latin America hear the Gospel as 'a call for justice which has to be understood in terms of the historical conditions of neo-colonialism and capitalist oppression ... The answer of faith must take the form of a commitment to the struggle for liberation'.. It follows, therefore, that 'the Church cannot claim to be the bearer of a neutral word which hovers above the concrete options It is always already committed - whether unwittingly or not... The liberation offered in the Gospel is



not exhausted in economic and political terms . . . but this deeper dimension can only be articulated from within the socio-political struggle'.

What does it mean to talk of Church unity in this context? Can the oppressor and the oppressed share the same Eucharist? Does the unity which is given in Christ (in the Cross which is both the judgement upon and justification of both sides in the conflict!) permit and require of us that we should both fight for justice against the oppressor and accept the gift of mercy for both of us? Does our unity in Christ transcend the conflict between us? If so, does that transcendence have a visible form, or is it only a mental image? Can we have both the beatitude of those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, and the beatitude of the merciful?

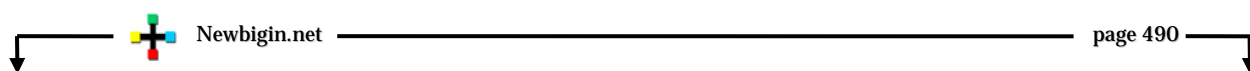
### **The Struggle for Cultural Identity**

Can there be a unity which gives the fullest freedom to the proper kinds of cultural diversity? When does acceptable cultural diversity become unacceptable moral deviation? Is the Indian caste-system a cultural form which Christians can happily accept (as 18th century missionaries and Indian Christians thought), or is it a moral offence against humanity which the Church should not tolerate (as 19th century missionaries, influenced by the French Revolution, insisted)? Is traditional African polygamy an element in society which ought not to be abruptly destroyed, or is it a moral offence which the Church ought not to tolerate?

We have a classic example of the problem in the New Testament itself, where we see St Paul fighting for the freedom of the Gentile converts against the insistence that they should conform to

the whole of the Jewish law, but then - at a later stage - fighting with equal intensity for the unity of Jew and Gentile within the one Christian fellowship and for their sharing in the one eucharistic feast.

The matter often comes to a head on the issue of language. Tamil Christians today are proud that they can take the highest levels of theological study in their mother tongue (a language so much richer and more ancient than English). But to have proposed 50 years ago that Tamils should do their higher theological study in any language other than English would have smacked of *apartheid*.

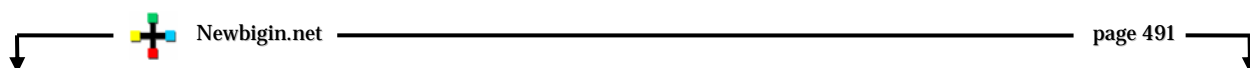


The Church has continually to face the tension between the claim of a broader and more inclusive unity and the claim of a narrower cultural loyalty through which people can express and develop their understanding of experience. Only a vast amount of sensitivity and flexibility can ensure a type of unity which does justice to cultural diversity.

### **Personal Authenticity**

The very word 'union' frightens many Christians. It conjures up visions of a suffocating bureaucracy, oppressive and not liberating. Perhaps they have experienced in the charismatic movements, in a 'house-church' or in one of the many informal Christian groups which are so full of life and hope, a fellowship so real that they do not feel the need for anything more. Indeed the vision of a 'merger' of all the existing ecclesiastical bureaucracies looks - from this angle - more like a nightmare than a dream.

There is no escape from the searching questions which are raised here. No existing ecclesiastical structure would, be a tolerable home for the whole human family! Without accepting the need for radical renewal of structures we cannot honestly talk about union. Certainly we cannot accept the naivete which imagines that you can do without structure altogether and live in a sort of pre-institutional innocence like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden! Nothing functions in history without some sort of pre-institutional structure. But the delegates at Nairobi will need to look hard at two issues in particular. (a) While we argue about Bishops, Presbyteries and Synods, searching the Scriptures for evidence of their divine appointment, Church bureaucracy continues to grow without benefit of scriptural authority! How do we assess this? Is it a necessary part of our culture? or is it a distortion of the Church? If so, what is the root of the error and what changes are needed to correct it, so that the Church begins to look more like the Father's one family gathered round the one table? (b) Congregationalists fear Presbyteries, Presbyterians fear bishops, and all Protestants fear the papacy! (We are all illogical, for we all recognize that both personal and synodical elements are needed for the proper oversight of the Church at every level. We need to do fresh thinking about how these two elements in church order can be so related to each



other - at every level - that they serve to support and not to threaten the spiritual freedom and integrity of each believer.

### **The Confessional Traditions**

Every Christian is the heir to some particular tradition within which he has been nurtured as a believer. The agonizingly difficult question put to him in the ecumenical encounter is this: does faithfulness to Christ mean losing my identity as I have received it (as a Lutheran, a Catholic, an

Anglican) or can I keep that identity within a wider unity? Two answers to that question are competing for acceptance, and will confront one another at Nairobi. The first answer is the one sketched at New Delhi: it looks to a 'fully committed fellowship' in each place, in which these separate identities are surrendered and a new identity is given. The second looks to a cluster of globally organised families of churches of the same confession each maintaining communion (at a distance) with the members of the same confession, but each retaining its separate identity locally. Three things compel me to choose the first of these alternatives. First; the New Testament speaks of the Church in each place, not of the church of each 'Type'. In the one place where 'types' appear ('I am of Paul; I am of Apollos') the Christians concerned are bluntly told that they cannot put any name in the place where only the name of Jesus can rightly appear. If the Church is a sign of the unity of mankind, it must be that sign in each place where men live. Second: the confessional 'types' are part of the history of Western Christendom. They do not involve real issues for the peoples of Asia and Africa. Many of the key terms in the debates are practically untranslatable into non-Western languages. Third: those who have lived through the experience of union know that the real joy - as well as the pain and anguish comes exactly at the point where we learned to surrender the old identity and to receive a new one - the new gift of a life together. It is a kind of death and re-birth.

And that is the whole point of the ecumenical movement. All the churches as we know them today, tied together in one structure, would not be 'a sign and sacrament of the unity of mankind'. Only churches which have been through a death and a re-birth can be the sign - because only they can reflect something of that one death which is the starting point of new life for the world.

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