



Episcopacy and the Quest for Unity

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J.E. Lesslie Newbiggin

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I am speaking as one nourished in the Reformed tradition of Churchmanship, who has shared in the wrestlings which led to the formation of the Church of South India and (incidentally) to my own consecration as a bishop in the historic succession, and who now shares in the wrestlings of the United Reformed Church in seeking to give an answer to the Ten Propositions.

I think that the problems which a person in my tradition has to deal with in this matter are at three levels:

1. There is the problem of prelacy – the long association of the office of bishop with worldly pomp and power. No one now defends this association, and there is no argument here. But the fact remains that – even when it has been consciously rejected – the unconscious consequences of the long association can be very enduring. No more needs to be said on this.
2. There is the problem of the relation of personal to conciliar elements in the pastoral care of the Church. Reformed Churches traditionally provide for the exercise of episcopate over a group of churches by means of a corporate body – presbytery, synod, council, assembly etc. Traditionally at the level of the local congregation they provide for an oversight which is both personal and corporate – a minister with a body of elders acting together. There is no serious questioning of the fact that both personal and conciliar elements are needed if the pastoral care of a congregation is to be rightly exercised. It seems to me to be a weakness of the Reformed position that this obvious fact is denied at the supra-congregational level. There is plenty of evidence (some of it painful) to show that the lack of any authoritative personal pastoral office can create situations where great harm is done to the Church and matters which ought to be settled by private advice and admonition have to be discussed in open assemblies. In fact that United Reformed Church, through its Provincial Moderators, is steadily developing a kind of personal episcopate at a regional level which is greatly appreciated by the churches. I do not believe that

there are grounds for serious disagreement here. There are, however, many matters which have to be discussed about the way in which the personal and the corporate elements in episcopate are related to each other. Ideally the pastoral person (bishop, moderator, president, etc.) should be one who so acts that he enables the council/synod/presbytery to act effectively, bringing out the contribution of each member and helping all to work effectively together. This does not always happen. The bishop may become a dictator, or he may become a rubber stamp for the tyranny of cleverly manipulated majorities. The CSI has struggled in its first thirty years to find the right pattern of relation between Bishop and Diocesan Council. But no one, I believe, would consider for a moment going back to the position we were in before union.

3. The really difficult problems arise at the third level, that which concerns the question of historic succession. Here I will simply set out my own views without attempting to defend them in detail:

- (a) I believe that historic continuity is a proper mark of the Church because it is simply the expression of unity in time, and unity is a proper mark of the Church. It is only where there has been a breach of unity that ordinations and consecrations have been conducted which did not express the consent of the whole Church, and which were in that respect improper. Where such breaches have occurred there has been sin, usually sin on both sides of the breach.
- (b) I have used the word 'proper' and not the word 'essential'. The difference between the two is essential for a true doctrine of the Church. To speak of continuity as 'essential' would be to say that where continuity has been broken there is no Church. To speak of it as 'proper' is to say that it is what corresponds to God's will for his Church, but it is not to say that God is bound to withhold from a body which lacks it his acknowledgment of it as his Church. In fact there have been breaches which have entailed the death of one of the fragments. When the Diocese of Tinnevely was formed in South India by the union of the two former separate bodies of converts of the CMS and the SPG, a very large number of adherents of the former, affirming that the SPG was an idolatrous organisation, formed a separate Church called the Pure Gospel Church. It existed for some decades but gradually petered out. In spite of the zeal of its members, God did not acknowledge it as a true Church. In the case of the great bodies which have existed in separation from one another for centuries but have nevertheless continued to bring forth the fruits of the Gospel it is impossible to deny that God has acknowledged them as Churches even though they lacked something which is proper to the Church.
- (c) I say that this distinction is 'essential' to a true doctrine of the Church, because without it we fall from grace into law. The Church is not to be defined by its adherence to that which is proper to it; it can only be defined in terms of God's grace to sinners who have failed to do and to be what is proper. On the other hand, if, because of God's grace to sinners, we affirm that the fragments are already in the full sense of the word Churches and need nothing further, we sin against God whose will it is that the Church should be one.
- (d) In practice the distinction will lead to a distinction between two lines of action. In the one case the rectification of the defect will be held to be the precondition of full recognition; in the other case the recognition will come first, and the rectification of the defect will be a shared act of obedience on the part of those who know themselves to be debtors to grace alone.
- (e) No church can be asked to take an action which implies that it is not a church and that its ministry is not a true ministry. But it can and must acknowledge that it is defective in that it fails to embody what God intends for his Church. Those of us who were involved in the South India discussions from the Reformed side could not accept a method of re-union which made the historic episcopate a precondition of mutual recognition. But we could and did gladly accept a method in which we mutually recognised one another and

together sought to live a common life within the succession which had been maintained by our Anglican partners. And, as a matter of simple fact, it was the work of the bishops which played a vital part in bringing together the hitherto separated congregations into a living unity.

- (f) It is, I think, pertinent to note that in South India the Anglican Dioceses were not asked to approve of full inter-communion before the three negotiating churches had committed themselves to unite; but from the moment at which the final decisions were taken there was full intercommunion. Even though this was a period of only a few months, it was important as establishing the principle that the presence of a ministry within the historic succession was not treated as an essential precondition of recognition. What is implied here is that separated Churches which have committed themselves to unity are in a different relation to God and to one another from Churches which are separated and are content to remain so.
- (g) It was my understanding that this was the theological principle underlying the Ten Propositions which explicitly linked mutual recognition to the act of covenanting for unity. I therefore find great difficulty in accepting what the resolutions of the General Synod seem to require of us, namely that as a recondition of recognition we should have already taken the historic episcopate into our system. (I leave aside the very important question whether episcopacy can be 'taken into' a church in this way, as though it were a thing which had some existence apart from the Church.) I fear that the acceptance of this could imply a falling away from grace into law.
- (j) I believe – in summary – that because unity is proper to the Church, it follows that continuity and order are proper. But I believe that everything in the Church must be understood both from the point of view of its origin in Christ and from the point of view of its goal in the summing up of all things in him. It follows, I believe, that any church order must be judged not only in the light of its origins (the historic succession) but also in the light of its goal, of the direction in which it points, of its tendency to lead towards the unity of God's people or towards their further division.

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