



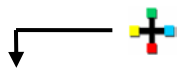
Common Witness and Unity

1980

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I would like to begin with a very simple negative point. Although it is negative, and does not carry us far into the heart of the matter, it is yet something which I find inescapable whenever I begin to think about common witness and unity. We live in a world of many faiths, many ideologies and many cultures. The Church, even though it embraces a great variety of cultures, is yet still something very much less than an embodiment of the unity of the whole human family. Yet we confess Jesus as the Head of the human race, as the Last Adam, as the one in whom alone the whole family of humankind can find its unity. When we make this confession in the presence of men and women of other faiths, there is a very simple question which they put to us. "You claim that Jesus is not just the Lord of the Christians, but the Head of the whole human race. You claim that he is so supreme and all-sufficient that all the vast variety of human culture, experience and temperament can be made one in him. And yet you yourselves have clearly not found this to be true in your own experience. You have not found the confession of Jesus to be enough to provide you with a common identity and the basis for a common life together. You insist on identifying yourselves by other names (Catholics, Protestants, Anglicans, Baptists, etc.) and you do not live in one fellowship. You are yourselves a most impressive demonstration of the falsity of your confession."

Although this is a negative way of putting the matter, it directs attention to the central point which must govern the whole argument about witness and unity. Our witness is to Jesus Christ. It is *he* who has promised to draw all men to himself (John 12:32). If it is in fact he who is drawing people, this fact will be manifest in the fact that they are drawn together into one. If they are not being drawn into one, the question arises whether it is he who is really drawing them – the question, in another words, whether it is a case of witness or a case of proselytism.

The distinction between witness and proselytism is, I think, to be drawn in the following way. Witness is essentially an action of the Spirit himself, which is always something of a surprise and miracle; proselytism is an action of a body of people, an action of which they are in full control. Let me try to justify these assertions.



In the New Testament, witness is described primarily as an activity of the Spirit, and only secondarily as an action of the Church. In the locus classicus at Acts 1:6-8 the apostles are given the promise that when the Holy Spirit is given they will be witnesses. They are not witnesses in themselves; it is the presence of the Spirit, who is the *arrabon* of the Kingdom, which constitutes them witnesses of the Kingdom. This witness (*marturia*) is not associated with the strength, vigour, resourcefulness, etc., of the Church; it is associated with its weakness and vulnerability. When the Church is on trial for Jesus' sake, it is the Spirit who will speak in the Church's testimony (Mark 13:9-11). When the Church is hated and persecuted by the world, the Spirit will be the Advocate who bears witness on behalf of Jesus (John 15:18-27). The witness of the Church is secondary and derivative. The Spirit will, in his own sovereign power, overturn the world's standards of sin, righteousness and judgement (John 16:7-11) and lead the Church into the fulness of the truth – which is the truth of coherence of all things in Jesus (John 16:12-15).

The Church is thus by no means the author or disposer of witness; witness is not simply an activity of the Church. It is an activity of the Spirit by which Jesus is glorified in the Church.

One could sum up what seems to be the teaching of the New Testament in four statements – statements which I must say have also been confirmed in my own experience as a missionary.

1. There is always an element of mystery and miracle about the way in which the witness of the Spirit to Jesus comes home into the heart of a person. It is never something which can be programmed and managed by the Church. It is always something fresh, and often something totally surprising and unexpected.

2. When – after the event – one enquires about how it is that this happened, one finds that it is because of some faithful word or act done for Jesus' sake: often there was no conscious intention to bring about a conversion. It was just a piece of faithful obedience directed towards the Lord. Typically (and this is certainly the teaching of the New Testament) it is when the Church is being faithful under pressure, when it is following the way of the Cross and accepting identification with the sin and pain of the world, that this miracle happens.

3. Consequently this action of the Spirit changes the Church as well as the world. Witness is not (to repeat) an action of which the Church is the subject and the unconverted world is the object. The situation is more complex. The witness of the Spirit both convicts the world (John 16:8) and teaches the Church what it did not know (John 16:13). The same Spirit who converts Cornelius also converts Peter and the Church (Acts 10 and 11); the Church is not the same afterwards as it was before. It has been moved one step nearer the "fulness of the truth" (John 16:13) which will only be fully understood when all things confess his Lordship.



4. By this witness of the Spirit it is Jesus who is glorified in the Church, not the Church which is glorified. The Church is led to give glory to God because new ranges of his purpose have been disclosed (Acts 11:18).

Proselytism is distinguished from genuine witness at each of these four points.

1. It is an activity of the Christian group which can be planned and carried through in the same style as a military campaign or the promotional drive of a big organization. The element of mystery is lacking. One can expect a proportion between the investment of effort and the result.

2. The strong and confident Christian group engages in proselytism. It relies on its strength and wisdom to achieve results.

3. The proselytising group does not expect to be changed by the encounter with the world. It expects that numbers will be added, but does not expect to have to learn new things from the converts.

4. The successfully proselytising group is proud of its accomplishments and publishes them as evidence of its spiritual vitality.

From the perspective of what I have portrayed (or perhaps caricatured) as the proselytising Christian group, it is obvious that there is no necessary connection between unity and mission. Indeed this enterprise will probably be more successful if each agency resolved to "go it alone" with its own style of work and its own emphasis. The result may well be numerical growth it does not do anything to meet the question posed at the beginning of this paper. Unity does not necessarily bring "results" in the form of numerical growth. But it is the form of Christian existence which corresponds to the proper character of witness – namely that witness is the work of the Holy Spirit who glorifies Jesus in the life of the faithful and obedient Church.

In our present divided state, which we cannot immediately convert into unity, it seems to me that the important thing is that we should be completely faithful to Jesus, and that we should be ready to welcome and to rejoice in all the work of the Spirit in and through those Christian bodies from which we are divided. If we do this we are at least refraining from hindering the work of the Spirit: we are allowing ourselves to be "led into the truth as a whole" (John 16:13) knowing that this can only happen as the Spirit bears his own witness and brings all things into obedience to Jesus.

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