

The First St Thomas of India Unity Lecture 1990

by
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"Is Full Church Unity Possible or Desirable?"

[The original lecture was delivered at Cambridge, Cardiff and Edinburgh. This is a synopsis of the lecture prepared by the Revd J.D. Clapham, the Editor of 'Pilgrim', to whom we are very grateful.]

I consider it a great privilege to be invited to deliver the first St Thomas Unity Lecture. The ray of light in the work of St Thomas has continued to shine through the centuries, though dimmed by the division of the Church in India, divisions brought by the entry of missionaries adding to the already painful dividedness of Indian society.

In 1919, 33 men, all but two of them Indian, and from different churches, met at Tranquebar in south-east India and issued the Tranquebar Manifesto:

"We find ourselves rendered weak and relatively impotent by our unhappy divisions — divisions for which we were not responsible, and which have been, as it were, imposed upon us from without; divisions which we did not create, and which we do not desire to perpetuate" ¹

This led to the formation of the Church of South India in 1947 that brought together Anglicans, Presbyterians, Methodists and Congregationalists — "the most important event in church history since Pentecost" wrote Bishop Michael Hollis in *"The Significance of South India"*.² And Bishop Stephen Neil, on the ecumenical movement, wrote, "The gravest abnormality is just that state of disunion in which churches in the West have so long acquiesced; and that abnormality must continue, until the churches in the West find their way to full corporate unity in one great church of Jesus Christ." ³

It is this challenge I want to deal with. Is full church unity possible or desirable? I pose two major questions: firstly, on what basis desirable? and, secondly, if desirable, how do we make it possible today? For me, full unity does not mean uniformity but a unity which is spiritual and structural, visible and invisible, and related to faith, practice and structure.

Desirability

In our new awareness of the shrinking global village and its rich diversity, and our dialogue with other faiths and ideologies, we see the danger of

equating unity with uniformity. On the other hand, such great ecumenical progress has been world-wide that we may be tempted — as on the Mount of Transfiguration — to say let us make three 'booths', Anglican, Roman Catholic and Reformed. But the ecumenical journey is not yet over. And the desirability of full church unity is dependent on our perception of the unity that is required of us. Here are aspects of the unity we seek.

1 Church Unity is a theological task. It is not simply a sociological convenience; as Karl Barth writes:

"There is no doubt that to the extent that Christendom does consist of actually different and opposing churches, to that extent it denies practically what it confesses theoretically — the unity and singularity of God." ⁴

All our divisions express our attempt to 'domesticate' God into our own histories and loyalties; thus a divided church stands under the judgment of God.

2 Church unity is a Christological task. The Church of South India, during its formation, put it this way:

"The united churches affirm that the purpose of the union into which they hope to enter is the carrying out of God's will as this is expressed in our Lord's prayer — 'That they may be one . . . that the world may believe that Thou didst send me.'" ⁵

Church unity is deeply grounded in the person of Christ; he prays his disciples may be one even as he and God are one. It is this hypostatic union that we are to emulate if our unity is to be full unity. Secondly, the incarnational element in our Christology requires much more than a disembodied 'spiritual' unity; it requires a visible expression. As Michael Kinnamon writes:

"Genuine unity should never be confused with structural merger (an imitation of the business world), since true unity rests on shared faith . . . it seeks expression in common worship, common service, common witness — and these demand some form of structure." ⁶

3 Church unity is a missiological task. The world missionary conference at Edinburgh in 1910 recognized freshly the tragedy of division; and unity became a central concern. As K.S.Latourette writes:

"Edinburgh 1910... blazed new trails in Christian fellowship and cooperation." ⁷

At Tranquebar in 1919, the South Indian church leaders placed the question of church unity clearly within the missionary framework. They said:

"...reconstruction after the war . . . the gathering together of the nations . . . the present critical situation in India itself, call us to mourn our past divisions and turn to our Lord Jesus Christ to seek in him the unity of the body expressed in one visible church. We face together the titanic task of the winning of India for Christ."⁸

This avoids two possible misunderstandings: firstly, unity as missiological task relates unity to the very essence of the church; division violates its very being; secondly, the ecumenical movement's division between doctrine and service can no longer be defended.

4 *Christian unity is an eschatological task.* An eschatological understanding differentiates between the ultimate and what is not ultimate; full church unity is further and further away as we keep moving towards it. The inauguration of the CSI marked only the beginning of the unity required of us. Denominational labels were given up, but caste labels — one of the great challenges today — rose to divide us; further, though we have begun ordaining women, we have a long way to go before becoming a united church of men *and* women. Similarly, can the churches in the West take seriously their eschatological vision and remain satisfied with 'reconciled diversity' and 'interchurch cooperation'? The unity we seek is not just of ecclesial reality, but touches the whole of humanity, and the ecological family of the universe. The *eschaton* is yet to come.

5 *Church unity is a doxological task.* The dominant mood at the inauguration of the CSI in 1947 as also of the CNI in 1970 was that of doxology — our grateful response to the salvation available to us in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ: unity is a celebration.

The possibility of full church union

The question is no longer, 'Should we come together?', but rather, 'How long are we justified in continuing as a divided church?'

1 *Full church unity begins with the local.* The arena of church unity is a particular place and time and not a large superstructure, so the CSI began in an area of South India; but it dreams about a church in India and talks with the CNI and the Mar Thoma and needs to be dreaming of unity with the Lutherans, Baptists and Roman Catholics. I discover such elements in the UK, a new sense of local churches being united in mission. There must be micro and macro dimensions in view.

2 Full church unity begins with eccentricity. The CSI was inaugurated a month after the independence of India from British rule. Such eccentricity, a certain focus outside of the *ecclesia*, is needed; unity is a reflection of the seriousness with which we recognize and fulfill the mission of the church in the world. "That the world may believe" will continue to be the goal and purpose of church unity.

3 Full church unity begins with commitment. Organic unity is not something you work towards but begin with. Like Indian marriage: get married and then start courtship, reconciling diversity, appreciating plurality and a coming together of body and soul.

Afterthoughts and continuing issues

If tired of ecumenism, work for a fresh awareness of the scandal and tragedy of disunity. Further, the ecumenical movement was rooted deeply in mission; in being *with* and in dialogue with 'others' we discover inspiration for ecumenical action; and how credible is Christian witness if divided? Church unity in India has not brought uniformity; rather there is diverse practice in episcopacy and liturgy — the united church truly begins to function as the *body* of Christ with its many members. And are there limits to diversity? What of churches that, for example, refuse to ordain women or that legitimize apartheid? Difficult, important questions that show how much, in the global church, we need each other.

Notes

0 An edited version (by the lecturer) of this lecture appeared in print in *The Welsh Theological Review*, Vol 1. no.2, 1991 and *The Ecumenical Review*, Vol.44, no 1, January 1992.

1 As quoted in Bengt Sundkler, *Church of South India: The Movement towards Union, 1990-1947*, London, Lutterworth, 1954, p.101

2 Michael Hollis, *The Significance of South India*, London, Lutterworth, 1996, p. 15

3 Ruth Rouse & Stephen C. Neill eds., *A History of the Ecumenical Movement: 1517-1948*, 3rd ed., Geneva WCC, 1986, p.476

4 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1, Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1956, p.675

5 *History of Christianity in India. Source Materials*, compiled by M.K. Kuriakose, Madras, CLS, 1982 p.381

6 Michael Kinnamon, *Truth and Community: Diversity and its Limits in the Ecumenical Movement*, Geneva, WCC, 1988, p.88

7 Rouse and Neill, *op. cit.*, p.356

8 Sundkler, *op. cit.*, p.101