

St Thomas of India Unity Lecture 2000

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"Towards a Spiritual Paradigm for Unity"

[This is a synopsis of the lecture prepared by the Revd J.D. Clapham, the Editor of 'Pilgrim', to whom we are very grateful.]

My concern: the ecumenical story must transcend our fixation with denominations.

These reflections arise during an aggressive outbreak of Hindu religio-cultural nationalism aimed at pan-Indian Hindu unity to safeguard upper caste privilege. Thus I do not wish to absolutize unity *per se*. Alas, by contrast, the Christian community, is disunited. Further, today's globalization points to a kind of united world but it is market-driven. In such a world, intra-national denominational unity with the Christological goal of "fullness of life" for all people is the bottom-line for Church unity.

The Positive Spirit

But the key spiritual task is not merging smaller churches into one larger church. Spiritually understood 'union' is the incarnation of the positive spirit, the Holy Spirit; the history of missions illustrates that being united with Christ activates miraculous power for good. Sadly, our denominationalism has been colonized by the spirit of negativity. We need to see in the 'Slain Lamb' the eschatological centre of the world – the ultimate mastery of the Negative by the Positive.

Towards a Theology of Church Union

Organic union or conciliar (functional) union? Both have limitations; the biblically normative would be the missional and evangelistic 'integration' of the various denominations. Biblical unity is a plurality as in the rainbow. We need to see the Church in organismic rather than organizational terms – each unit reflects in its own way something of the whole. Hence, Paul's teaching of the Church as the Body of Christ with its many parts. The pre-requisite for such diverse unity is self-denial (Mat 16v24), the 'brokenness' that Jesus incorporated into the Eucharistic sacrament; it is the repentant return to Christ that, according to Newbigin, inspires the passion for church unity among denominations, the healing of their inner dis-relationship.

The Climate for Church Union

It cannot be a matter just of executive or conciliar action, but needs to be a God-centred spiritual ferment that liberates and renews the faith community; John the Baptist's preparatory ministry is essential; as it was prior to the CSI Union in 1947 and the CNI in 1970. This included -

(a) *A widespread passion for church union*: as one of the first Indian bishops of the CSI said, "Left to themselves, Indians would have united long ago".

(b) *A healthy balance between denominational loyalties and nationalistic awareness* expressed, for instance, in the post-war Tranquebar Manifesto: "We face the titanic task of the winning of India for Christ . . . Yet we find ourselves rendered weak and relatively impotent by our unhappy divisions – divisions for which we were not responsible . . . and which we do not desire to perpetuate".

(c) *Sense of mission*. Back in 1927, Bishop V.S.Azariah, said, "Unity may be theoretically a desirable ideal in Europe or America. But it is vital to the life of the church in the mission field".

(d) *God-dependence and Christ-centredness*. The CSI scheme accepted, "acknowledging the name of Christ as the Head of the Body of the universal Church" as the fundamental qualification to join the Union; the same thrust was also evident in the CNI Union."

(e) *Charismatic and prophetic leadership* Biblically, prophetic ministry freed people from narrow obsessions to see God's concerns for the world at large. Lacking this, denominational leadership succumbs to inward, denominational concerns, often with a besieged and defensive mentality.

(f) *Spiritual renewal* Spirituality, in one sense, is a pilgrimage away from self-centredness towards a rediscovery of our fellow-humanity; the period of prayer for such unity is matched by the willingness to accept the gift of unity and the price tag that comes with it.

One God, one world, one Church

Globalization has added new scope and urgency to church union movement all over the world. Kinship is "the religious element" (Martin Buber) that the world desperately needs today. God expects the Church is to "preach and heal" (Mat.10vv7,8), basic to the Good News is the revealed truth of our universal kinship, which cannot be fragmented by nationalities, ethnicities, ideologies and models of development. But to preach the healing message, the physician-preacher must heal herself.

The Task of Wider Ecumenism

In India, inter-religious tensions increase rather than diminish in the wake of globalization; religious communities become more aware of each other. The Church needs to develop a radically Christological vision to engage in the challenges of such ecumenism.

Biblically, the approach must be incarnational: the Word became flesh and dwelt in our midst. The goal is not to make people conform to our fixed notions but to 'dwell in' the given context so as to transform it from within. Fulfilment, not annexation, is the authentic incarnational goal. "Winning India for Christ" is pseudo-religious triumphalism. We need to liberate the ecumenical mindset from that historical past.

One of the vibrant assertions in the Bible is that God is not partial to any people or system. As Jesus said to the Samaritan woman, when God is worshipped in spirit and in truth, people will realize that God does not reside on mountains of sectarianism. The true temple is the inner sanctuary of the human species, individually and collectively.

The Heretical Imperative

In Jesus Christ we see a passionate desire to bring out the best that is hidden in the other. The duties in the Great Commission are, perhaps, best understood not as a religious but as a spiritual paradigm; that is, to see the individual and collective destiny of our species as "fullness of life" for all people.

The heretical imperative may well be that the ultimate ecumenical goal is not to secure peace between denominations, not even peace between religions, but to effect the liberation of all people from 'eccentric' religions and religiosities so that they discover the blessedness of being God-centred. In the heavenly Jerusalem there are no temples for the Son Himself is in the midst of the people.

Ultimately ecumenism is a process of liberation; it is not what we sell to the world; it is rather what God does to us. The Risen Christ "opened their eyes" (Luke 24v45). In that sense, it is integral to the mission of Christ: the opening of the eyes of the blind, leading to a new, liberating and integrating vision. Church union is the outworking of that vision in a state of faithful obedience to the Lord of the Church whose prayer it is that "all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you". (John 17v21)