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Unity, Catholicity and Wholeness

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The quest for unity, in the Church as well as in the world, is one of the most distinctive characteristics of the modern age. As far as the Church is concerned, it is seen partly in the ecumenical movement, which the late Archbishop William Temple called 'the great new fact of our time'. In the realm of thought, 'the gift of the catholic vision' has been described by Prof. H. Richard Niebuhr as the greatest of God's gifts to the theology of the present day. Ecumenical movement has brought a new and intensified denominationalism, but the older type of denominational theology, which could complacently shut its eye to other types of thought, or could see them merely as systems to be opposed, is definitely on the way out. There are differences of theological thought today, but they do not usually differ along denominational lines. There is no well-defined school of ecumenical theology, but any theologian of today must be alive to the new experience that the Church is passing through if his theology is to be valid and relevant.

In the light of the ecumenical movement and through the experience of those attempts towards 'visible' and organizational unity in the Church in various parts of the world, our concept of the Church's unity itself has deepened and widened. It is the purpose of this article to suggest very briefly something of the widened meaning of unity. This may be done by taking the related words, wholeness and catholicity, and seeing their relevance to the idea of unity.

Wholeness (from Greek *holos*), catholicity (from *kath' holos*) and ecumenicity (from *oikoumenē* meaning the whole inhabited world) are all words with related meanings. 'The idea of wholeness,' says Dr. Oliver S. Tomkins, 'expresses in English that same "catholicity" of the Church in the purpose of God.'¹ Perhaps the word catholicity would have been better than the word ecumenism if the former had not undergone a reduction or partial loss of meaning.

Wholeness is inseparable from unity. It is richer and deeper in meaning than the latter. In Biblical terminology the word

¹ O. S. Tomkins, *The Church in the Purpose of God*, p. 8.

'whole' is closely associated with the meanings of salvation and health. Wholeness implies health or well-being in the deepest sense and in the case of the Church, unity is essential to its well-being. Wholeness or catholicity must not only mean world-wide expansion, or suitability for all people, but must in the final analysis include the meaning of comprehension of all humanity and all phases of human activity within the saving activity of God revealed in Christ. Until the Church is the transforming society, coextensive with humanity, wholeness cannot be said to have been achieved.

Any discussion of the meaning of the Church's unity must refer to the Epistle to the Ephesians and to the final discourse and high priestly prayer in the Fourth Gospel. In these two places, more than anywhere else, we get a picture of the Church in its wholeness, unity, health, as it ought to be, as it is in the purpose of God. The oneness of the Church is derived from God. The Church is one because 'there is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us, who is above all and through all and in all'. The Church is 'his body, the fulness of him fills all in all' (Eph. 4:4-6; 1:23). To get the idea of wholeness we must take seriously the word 'all' which is repeated so often in the early chapters of Ephesians. In St. Paul's view the Church is the society in which the divided and partial societies of the past are united in a new creation. The middle wall of partition is broken down (2:24) and those who were separated are made one in the fellowship where Jew and Gentile alike are heirs, members of the body, partakers of the promises in Christ Jesus through the Gospel (3:6).

In the Fourth Gospel, the idea of the Church as being within the divine life is emphasized. The figure of the vine and the branches as well as the words, 'that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us' (17:21), bring out the idea that the Church maintains its healthy life by abiding in close relation to Godhead.

So far all the leading branches of the Church will agree. To refer only to two representative thinkers: M. J. Congar says that the Church is 'one with the very oneness of God, outside whom she does not exist . . . The Church is the community of souls living the very life which is the life of the Blessed Trinity because the object of their lives is the same as the life of God Himself'.² Karl Barth's words are equally emphatic: 'We have no right to explain the multiplicity of the churches at all'.³

Today we are in a situation in which we have to search for the unity which, we believe, has been given to the Church. Unity, wholeness is given, but we do not have it. We are not healthy; we are not whole. The gift of the catholic vision has

² *Divided Christendom*, pp. 51, 57-58.

³ *The Church and the Churches*, p. 40.

enabled the churches to see the impossible position in which they are. There is a new realization that unity is the will of God and that it is essential for the wholeness of the Church. Disunity is recognized as sin. Karl Barth puts the point forcibly: 'We have to deal with it (the multiplicity of the churches) as we deal with sin, our own and others, to recognize it as a fact, to understand it as the impossible thing which has intruded itself upon ourselves, without the power to liberate ourselves from it. We must not allow ourselves to acquiesce in its reality; rather we must pray that it be forgiven and removed, and be ready to do whatever God's will and command may enjoin in respect of it . . . The multiplicity of churches is simply our helplessness in His sight. We cannot listen for His voice, without an act of decision, choice, confession: yet we cannot decide and confess our faith without falling into separation and so coming into contradiction against Him. Who are we, and what is His Church, if that is our standing towards Him? We had best attempt to give no other answer than this, that we are those, that the Church is the congregation of those, who know that they are helpless in the presence of One who as their Saviour and their Lord is greater than they'.⁴

Congar, speaking from a very different theological point of view, is equally emphatic about the unfortunate character of the present situation in the Church. He says that separations form a melancholy series of landmarks in this history of Catholic Christianity. 'In the eleventh century East and West were separated: in the sixteenth century whole nations seceded, and the tale of schism goes on to our day. But the worst thing is that the separations have lasted and that their very persistence has become not only a matter of habit but a new motive for separate life. We have got into the habit of living without each other, as parallel lines of Christianity which never meet, each of which notwithstanding propounds to its faithful the commandment of our Lord, "If thou offer thy gift at the altar and there remember *that thy brother hath anything against thee*, leave thy offering before the altar and go first to be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift".'⁵

The same realization and mutual concern characterize many of the statements of the World Council of Churches. In the report of the Amsterdam Assembly we read: 'We come from Christian churches which have for long misunderstood, ignored and misinterpreted one another; we are all sinful men and we are heirs to the sins of our fathers . . . It is our common concern for (the Church) that draws us together, and in that concern we discover our unity in relation to her Lord and Head . . . We cannot rest with our present divisions. Before God, we are responsible for one another'.⁶

⁴ *The Church and the Churches*, pp. 40-41, 51-52.

⁵ M. J. Congar, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

⁶ Amsterdam Report, I, pp. 211, 217.

The lack of friendly relations and cooperation between denominations is much to be regretted, but the unity that we seek must go far beyond friendly coexistence. We cannot be satisfied with the idea that each of the denominations is, as it were, a branch of the main tree, and that the differences that separate the 'branches' are of no great significance. The differences that separate us are important. They prevent Christians from worshipping together; they prevent them from joining one another in the Lord's Supper. It is doubtful whether we can accept the suggestion that some churches are 'bridge churches' which mediate between extremes. The concept presupposes a grading and evaluating of churches so that they can be arranged in some scale or order.

There are some churches which, while cooperating, wholeheartedly or not, in the ecumenical movement, profess to believe and proclaim that they are the only true Church, maintaining the true faith and right practice in their wholeness. Prof. Zander speaks for the Orthodox Church: 'We must decisively proclaim the belief that our church contains absolute truth, and that all deviations from it are distortions of the Christian teaching. But we must not forget for a moment that members of other denominations take up exactly the same point of view with regard to their doctrines—which is perfectly right and proper if we recognize their existence at all. The ecumenical problem thus paradoxically combines mutually-exclusive principles, and there seems to be no way out of it. And yet the slightest attempt at compromise either destroys the very essence of ecumenism or replaces its tragic but gracious conflicts by the indifference of vague idealism'.⁷ It is impossible not to agree with Prof. Zander when he says that there seems to be no way out of it. Is it not more realistic to come together with the recognition that we are all sinful men and we are heirs of the sins of our fathers and that sin has entered into the interchurch relations as well as into some of the formulations of doctrine? It is perhaps true that the purpose of the ecumenical movement may be defeated if the churches are set first of all to a self-examination to see where in the past each has gone wrong. It is unlikely that, with the weight and wealth of tradition and social inheritance and historical situations that condition our thought, we will ever, separately, be able to arrive at an impartial judgment of our own past.

What, then, is our way in the search of wholeness and unity? Rome's way and to a great extent the way of the Eastern Orthodox Church is to look back to a unity that was real in the past, and to ask those who in their sight have 'gone away' from the fold to return. Rome talks of reunion. But return is impossible. Time moves only in one direction and it is impossible to go back in time. We stand in a context different from that

⁷ *The Essence of Ecumenical Movement in Student World*, 1937 second quarter, p. 167.

in which our forefathers stood in 451 or 1054 or 1517. It is unrealistic to attempt to achieve unity on the basis of formulae or programmes that may have been adequate at that date, but are inadequate today.

There are others who seem to assume the permanent existence of the present denominational pattern and look for some type of federal union. They feel that it is impossible to envision one World Church or even one non-Roman World Church. Uniformity is not desirable. What is to be looked for is the growth of interdenominationalism. 'It is inconceivable that the major types of Protestant Christianity, namely Lutheranism, Calvinism, Anglicanism, and that noncredal, nonauthoritarian Protestantism which originated in the so-called sectarian movements of the Reformation and has blossomed in various forms particularly in English and American Christianity, will cease to be special independent entities in the life of Christendom. Within the ecumenical movement the Christian ways represented by them will continue to assert themselves—yet without the spirit of absolutism and without particularism'.⁸

The acceptance of this position would mean repudiating the real end and aim of the ecumenical movement itself. It is uncertain whether the kind of federation or association envisaged here will cure our 'homesickness of the *una sancta*'. While it is true that unity through uniformity is undesirable, it does not follow that unity in multiformity can be achieved only on the basis of separate existence of denominations. Further, while it is difficult and painful for each of us to think of the possible loss of the identity of our particular church tradition, it does not mean that it is impossible. The formation of the Church of South India more than ten years ago, in which Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregationalist churches merged, and lost their separate identities, considered along with the fact that all these separate bodies acted with the concurrence or permission of the churches in the West through whose activity they came into being, proves that it is possible for denominations to lose their separate existence for the sake of a more wholesome form of church life. It was not unity through uniformity that was attempted in South India. Each group had a contribution to make to the totality of the new life, and the attempt was to *grow together* into a richer life wherein whatever was valuable in all the different traditions would be preserved and not abandoned. The ultimate success of the attempt has to be seen in history, but the last decade has shown that it is possible.

Unity in itself may not be a good thing. The concern for unity may even become an idol which we put in the place of God. We have to look forward and work towards wholeness, not merely unity. Wholeness and health will come from a renewed obedience and facing of the judgment of Christ on our various

⁸ W. Pauck, *The Heritage of the Reformation*, p. 288.

traditions and forms. It is in the common obedience that we will find wholeness and also the fulfilment of the values of our separate traditions.

We cannot hope to find light remedies for our deep and difficult problems. The catholic vision has to extend into all realms of the Church's life, and all things must be seen afresh in the light of that vision before we make any real headway in our search after wholeness. We cannot expect the ecumenical movement in its organized activities to heal all our ills. Karl Barth has warned us against putting our trust too easily in church movements. 'The union of churches is a thing which cannot be manufactured, but must be found and confessed, in subordination to that already accomplished oneness of the Church which is in Jesus Christ . . . The union of churches into the oneness of the Church would mean more than mutual tolerance, respect and co-operation ; above all it would mean, as the decisive test of unity, that we should join in making confession of our faith and thus should unitedly proclaim to the world and so fulfil that commandment of Jesus on which the Church is based . . . A union of the Churches in the sense of that task which is so seriously laid upon the Church would mean a union of the confessions into one unanimous confession. If we remain on the level where confessions are divided, we remain where the multiplicity of the churches is inevitable'.⁹

The unity to which we look forward is not merely of the forms of government or formulations of faith. We must seek for 'that unity of all human living, a balanced wholeness of work, craftsmanship, family life, community life, scholarship, games, art, bound together in a living and joyful sacrifice laid before God in worship, by union with the Word made flesh and in the power of the Holy Spirit. That is what "unity of the Church" really means; it is what men were made for'.¹⁰ The divisions of the Church today prevent true unity being achieved even in the sphere which may be called religious or spiritual in a narrow sense. Instead of assuming the sanctity and permanent nature of our present-day denominational system, we must look forward to the day, far or near, when they will merge, having been 'melted down and recast in the fires of the world's affliction', united through a death and rebirth.

We lose confidence when we look at the life of the churches as we know it and of the life of the members, that is, ours ; but when we remember that the Church is Christ's, and that he has again awakened the Church to a new obedience, having given her a new vision, we have hope. And the signs of the new beginnings in fresh ventures of obedience assume a new proportion when it is realized that what the Lord of the Church has worked in her is something which would have been inconceivable a

⁹ K. Barth, *op. cit.*, pp. 63, 67.

¹⁰ O. S. Tomkins, *Wholeness of the Church*, p. 71.

generation ago, our faith is fortified, along with the love for our brethren of other folds. So we go forward, trusting not in ourselves, but in Him who has called us afresh in the ecumenical search after wholeness.

INDIGENOUS THEOLOGY

'If you mention in academic circles that you would like to see the growth of an African Theology you will be met by the usual "It all depends what you mean by—" or "Let's be quite sure of our terms" as well as the occasional "There can no more be an African Theology than there can be an African Mathematics, these things transcend race and place". Let us try to define more closely. We surely mean more than just a theology produced by individuals who happen to be African. We do not mean anything like the theology of the German so-called Christians who mixed up theology with a myth of race. For an analogy we can look back to the early Church. Tertullian, St. Cyprian and St. Augustine, all of them men from this continent, produced a theology which was part of the heritage of the world-wide Church and yet it could be justly called "African" by the Church Historians. The same basic truths had filtered through the minds of the African Fathers as through the minds of the Greek Fathers, but the resultant presentation and slant given to the material was redolent of the Africa which produced the men. So today it is our hope that the fundamentals of theology will pass through the modern African mind and be presented in a manner acceptable to the universal Church but which would be nonetheless rightly called "African". For this the basic necessity is a study by Africans of the original founts of theology without the distorting medium of intermediary paraphrases and translations and their presuppositions.'

(Editorial : Ghana Bulletin of Theology, December 1958)