

An Assessment Of Church Unions in India

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I. Background Introduction

Long before the emergence of the Lambeth Quadrilateral—more accurately 'Chicago Quadrilateral'—as a possible basis for uniting episcopal and non-episcopal churches, and long before Edinburgh 1910 which marks the beginning of the modern ecumenical movement, stirrings towards unity had developed in India in the wake of missionary co-operation followed by a gentlemen's agreement, called the 'rules of comity'. The local or regional missionary conferences soon developed into all-India conferences, beginning with the one held at Allahabad in 1872. The Madras Conference in 1879 went so far as to suggest a federated union of churches in which the various church polities could co-exist.

Towards the end of the last century national consciousness, leading to desire for autonomy and independence for the country, began to play its part. It found expression politically in the establishment in 1895 of the Indian National Congress and, within the Christian enterprise, in the formation of the Indian Missionary Society at Tirunelvely in 1903 and of the National Missionary Society at Serampore on Christmas Day 1905.

Edinburgh 1910 gave birth to various streams of co-operative Christian thought and action which culminated in the formation of the World Council of Churches in 1948. From our immediate point of view, the most fruitful outcome of the Edinburgh Conference was the establishment, through the labours of John R. Mott, of the National Missionary Council in 1912/13 which later, in 1923, became the National Christian Council of India. Although not permitted by its Constitutional to deal with matters of Faith and Order, the Council indirectly engendered a desire for the visible unity of the Church.

It is with the above background that we can see the significance and initiative of Tranquebar 1919, a largely national consultation on mission and unity. It is worthwhile recalling at least one excerpt from its Manifesto, because it provides some elements for the assessment of Church Unions with which we are concerned.

We believe that union is the will of God, even as our Lord prayed that we might all be one, that the world might believe. We believe that union is the teaching of the Scripture. There is

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one body and one Spirit, even as also ye were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all, and through all, and in all.

We believe that the challenge of the present hour in the period of reconstruction after the war, in the gathering together of the nations, and the present critical situation in India itself, calls us to mourn our past divisions and to 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—one fifth of the human race. Yet, confronted by such an overwhelming responsibility, 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.

In discussing practical steps the Manifesto suggested the 'Lambeth Quadrilateral', slightly differently worded, with a combination of Church polities which someone has well defined as 'episcopresbyterial'.

It must be noted in passing that a union of the Congregationalist and Presbyterian Churches had already taken place in South India in 1908 and in North India was to take place in 1924. However, as the South India United Church and the United Church of Northern India became part of the larger unions in South and North India, we shall concentrate mainly on these larger unions resulting in the formation of the Church of South India in 1947 and in the Church of North India in 1970. These unions pretty well represent the main theological and ecclesiastical implications of Church Union in India. For this reason the CSI—Lutheran Conversations and more recently the consultation between the CSI, the CNI and the Lutherans do not concern us here apart from signifying the growing desire for union expressed with differing emphases. In any case, the possible resultant union from these overtures is still in the future.

II. Principles of Assessment

With what criteria are we going to assess these two ventures in unity? I think the following points may be put forward as generally acceptable, although other considerations can be added:

First, obedience to God's will and purpose as revealed in Jesus Christ and confirmed and illuminated by the Holy Spirit. Although there will be differences in interpreting that revelation in practical details, the general testimony of the Scriptures, particularly the New Testament, is appealed to by every known scheme or plan of union. For no one can disagree that God's will for His Church is unity. But as to what kind of unity, visible or invisible, organizational or spiritual, federal or unitary, national or ecumenical, there are differences of

opinion. We can only apply the principles as operative in the early Church which was in space and time much nearer to the 'mind of Christ'.

Secondly, faithfulness to their own avowed aims as expressed in their Constitutions, especially the Governing Principles or Objects and Purposes. From the Constitution of the Church of South India we quote only a few sentences leaving out the scriptural basis:

...But this unity of the Spirit must find expression in the faith and order of the Church, in its worship, in its organization and in its whole life, so that, as the Body of Christ, it may be a fit instrument for carrying out His gracious purpose in the World . . . The Church of India is formed by a combination of different elements each bringing its contribution to the whole, and not by absorption of any one by any other . . . The test of all local schemes of union is that they should express locally the principle of the great catholic unity of the Body of Christ. The Church of South India desires, therefore, conserving all that is of spiritual value in its Indian heritage, to express under Indian conditions and in Indian forms the spirit, the thought and the life of the Church universal. . . The Church of South India purposes ever to be mindful of its missionary calling. . .

The Church of North India was formed on the basis of *The Fourth Revised Edition 1965 of the Plan of Church Union in North India/Pakistan*, containing in its Preface a Statement of Intention which unfortunately does not find a place in the Constitution adopted in 1974. This only states the objects and purposes of the Church in one sentence: 'The objects and purposes of the Church of North India shall be to proclaim by word and deed, the gospel of Jesus Christ, who is the Lord and Master of the Church, for the salvation and good of all mankind.' There is little or nothing said about the context in which the Church has to live, worship and witness.

Thirdly, the Church must not only be 'rooted in Christ and related to the soil', but it must obviously in its organization, service and witness, be relevant and viable, if it is to be, in its locale, the sign of the Kingdom. Indigenisation—that much misunderstood and much-abused word—is a corollary of the Christian belief in the Incarnation. This limiting factor does not diminish but enhances the contribution it can make to the many-splendoured Church universal of Christ. As C. H. Dodd has said, 'The clarity and decision with which the New Testament . . . proclaims the unity of mankind before God, without denying or condemning the natural divisions which give character to its history, are specific marks of the Christian outlook' (*Christianity and the Reconciliation of the Nations*, p. 5).

Fourthly, the Incarnation not only justifies indigenisation, but it also demands involvement in the world and its needs. This alone can save the Church from self-centred introversion and help it to become, like its Master, a servant of others. It demands *kenosis* and *humilia-*

tion. It condemns ostentation and display of power. It calls for a new style of life and organization which gives expression to the simplicities of our Lord and His Gospel.

Finally, the Church in India, however indigenous in its expression, remains part of the Church universal. What happens here may influence the churches elsewhere as has already happened as a result of Church Union ventures in this country. No assessment of Church Unions here can leave out their implications for the related churches overseas and the Church at large.

III. An Assessment of the Church Unions

In the light of the principles indicated above, how do we assess these Unions? One must enter this undertaking with a profound sense of gratitude to God for the measure of achievement He has granted, a deep sense of humility in treading this sacred ground, and an earnest prayer for a dispassionate approach.

A word at the outset must be said about the process of negotiations which in the case of South India took 28 years and that of North India 40 years. It is not altogether an uplifting story. Bengt Sundkler, who has written the best documented account of the Church of South India, has entitled one of his chapters: 'Constitutional Safeguards and Mutual Trust'. This rather paradoxical statement, however, does not conceal the tug of war which characterised the negotiations. Sundkler himself comments: 'It is not perhaps altogether unjust to say that, in the case of one or two historians who have treated this development, the confused impression is conveyed of a great multitude of plans and counter plans signifying nothing. The impression has also been conveyed of a sequence of events, sometimes called "a decade of deterioration", which reached its nadir about 1939-40, when a new conception of church order was introduced after having passed a series of crises. . .' (*The Church of South India*, p. 177). The negotiations in North India were not dissimilar, and the tragic end before the inauguration of the Church of North India in 1970 was the withdrawal of the largest party to the long-drawn negotiations, namely the Methodist Church in Southern Asia, for what one can only call non-theological reasons.

However, one cannot but be thankful that, while plans and schemes in many parts of the world have come and gone, the Church of South India and the Church of North India are facts and living realities.

The reason for the ecclesiastical skirmishes is not far to seek: the fourth side of the Quadrilateral, namely the historic episcopate and related ministries, chiefly accounts for this. In this connection the remarks of G. V. Job, one of the 'Rethinking Christianity in India' group, are pertinent:

When he (the Indian Christian) is . . . driven to the Lord, he will get a glimpse of His irresistible love. Then he would set about seeking strength and reinforcement for his faith in a fellowship of believers. In this search, he will naturally turn to the New

Testament. There he will find a triangle, not a quadrilateral, as the apostolic foundation of the Church. Having been taught to regard with respect things apostolic, he would fasten his mind on this triangle whose three corners are one faith, one Lord, and one baptism (*Rethinking Christianity in India*, p. 21).

The recent breakdown of relationships between the Episcopal Church in Scotland and the Church of Scotland and those between the United Church of Canada and the Anglican Church in Canada are only two of the many examples of the rock on which the ship of Christian reunion efforts has floundered. The Wider Episcopal Fellowship mooted at Lambeth 1968 has shown very little vitality.

It may be that a new approach more consistent with the New Testament has to be found, and perhaps G. V. Job's words have to be taken more seriously. When the Church was very young, it went along pretty well without a fixed pattern of the ministry. While we cannot and should not go back to the early Church in everything, this flexibility in the pattern of the ministry has something very valuable to teach the Church today.

Along with the inherited patterns of ministries, the negotiating churches have had to deal with administrative machinery. The Unions have not simplified the structures of organization. The baggage has become heavier, too much for the Indian Church to carry, and this in turn has led to continuing dependence on outside resources. (The CNI has had to shift its target of self-support three times.) As committees and commissions have increased, Parkinson's Law has begun to operate with a vengeance, and an unhealthy desire for high places has become evident. The self-appraisal report of the CSI published in 1963 under the title of *Renewal and Advance* has something to say about this:

We are concerned more with what we can get out of the Church by way of material and social advantage, or positions, or power, or prestige, than with what we can contribute in gift and service. Our internal administration and rules, appointments and offices, the improvement of our buildings and other material facilities, the prestige that institutions give us as a community, and the jobs they can provide for ourselves; these are the things which bulk large in our thoughts and consume our time, energy and resources (p. 52).

The Church of North India has not had such a self-appraisal yet, but at the Second Synod a report on self-support was presented wherein occurs the following sentence: 'Members often think only in terms of their own local congregations and even dioceses do not always think as a whole, but in terms of previous denominational blocks within the dioceses receiving personnel and funds from overseas connections.'

The question of inherited structures immediately raises the question of 'the indigenous expression of Christianity'. *The Derby Report* on the Scheme of Union in South India published in 1946 contained these words:

The Scheme as it now stands suggests too much of an attempt to reconcile divergent Western traditions, instead of asking what form of faith and of Catholic order an indigenous Indian Church ought to be developing.

Earlier V. Chakkarai, another of the Re-Thinking Group, had written:

To anyone coming from the West, with a keen interest in Christianity, the Indian Church will present no new features with which he is not familiar in the churches in the home-land. The Indian Churches will be pale replicas. They cannot open to him any new vistas into unknown regions of Christian experience. Ecclesiastical architecture, dress, music, rites, ceremonies, and thought will be echoes, strong or feeble as the case may be, of Western religious life (*Re-thinking Christianity in India*, p. 106).

More recently the late Swami Abhishiktananda wrote:

Conversion to Christianity did not appear to Hindus to be a conversion to a higher spiritual life and to real personal experience of Christ, but to a simple change of rites, myths, concepts and social customs, bearing too often the mark 'made in the West' (*The Church in India*, p. 23).

Some experiments are being made, but by and large the Unions have made little progress towards making the churches worthy of Christ and worthy of India. What about the involvement of the United Churches in the country, and its social, political and economic needs? In the CSI it was only after the publication of *Renewal and Advance* that some attention began to be given to the Church's involvement in national affairs. These were, of course, the traditional forms of service through institutions of education, health and rural uplift. Perhaps the two most significant developments in recent years have been the Industrial Team Service connected with St Mark's Cathedral, Bangalore, and the Madras City Mission. The CNI Commission on Religion and Life has made this confession: 'In the significant political and social processes now going on, it appears that Christians, on the whole, have only very little influence or even interest.'

In the last analysis the United Churches have to be judged by their performance in the field of mission and evangelism which were the prime motive factors in the movement towards unity. With reference to the Church of South India, the *Renewal and Advance Report* made these remarks:

Evangelism has come to occupy a minor place in the life, thought and activities of the Dioceses (pp. ix-x).

There has been a slackening of the sense of commitment to the Christian life and task, and the sense of vocation has gradually become weak among both ministers and laity (p. 43).

In the reports on evangelism made at the Second Synod of the CNI in 1974, all that was reported was two meetings of the Committee with some recommendations. At the enlarged meeting of the Synod Executive in February 1975 an instruction was given to the Mission and Evangelism Committee to hold a representative consultation and to make plans for the triennium. There is no indication anywhere as to the general situation in the Church in connection with this concern. It is too early to expect a self-assessment of the kind the CSI was able to undertake after nearly 15 years of its existence.

The CNI Report to the Second Synod ends with a quotation from Dr Coggan out of a speech he made before he was made Archbishop of Canterbury. It provides a rebuke and a challenge both to the CSI and the CNI. Here it is:

Let us have a moratorium on paper, reports, commissions and committees for five years and get on with the real job of the Church. It is time to turn aside from re-structuring, re-organizing, re-deploying and even re-union to the central concern of evangelism.

Of course, in the present circumstances both in England and here, this is a counsel of perfection, but it certainly reflects the concern of the early Church when none of the present paraphernalia of mission and evangelism existed but only a magnificent obsession. The question one has to ask is whether by union the missionary and evangelistic thrust has been sharpened or dulled. The CSI was frank enough to confess: 'It can hardly be doubted that the increased introversion of the church, which has a bearing on many evils, has to a considerable extent been the result of union' (*Renewal and Advance*, p. 53). The CNI cannot claim any better situation because it has taken five years to hammer out its voluminous Constitution!

IV. Conclusion

Does all this mean that the Unions have been a mistake? To say so will be a rank blasphemy. Anything which can be done to make the Christ-given unity a little more expressive and visible, should only evoke gratitude to God. Here and there indications have been given of the contribution which these ventures of faith have made. No one in his senses would like to go back to the pre-union situation. The establishment of the CSI was regarded by some as the greatest event since the Reformation. Of course, we realise now that the Reformation itself as it developed was not an unmixed blessing, certainly in the matter of Christian unity. But there is no doubt that September 27, 1947, stands as a great landmark in the Church's struggle to regain its lost unity, and the ripples of that movement are now being felt in more than thirty countries of the world.

What of the future? It is not within the scope of this paper either to prophesy, formulate or legislate. One thing has become crystal clear to the writer, namely that we dare not go along the ruts we have followed. Something new has to happen, and a statement passed by the Enlarged Executive of the CNI in February, 1975, reflects this concern:

The church everywhere must be rooted in Christ but related to the soil. If this is to be true, then it is imperative that the CNI must be worthy of Christ and worthy of India. Keeping in mind the spiritual, cultural and economic background of our country, it cannot be content with inherited structures which are neither relevant nor supportable. In the early stage of its life the CNI must give serious thought to its future structures, its witness and service. . .

In a letter to fellow Christians in Communist countries Karl Barth wrote these words:

The Church's existence does not always have to possess the same form in the future that it has possessed in the past, as though this was the only possible pattern. . . The continuance and victory of the cause of God, which the Christian Church is to serve with her witness, is not unconditionally linked with the forms of existence which it has had up to now. Yes, the hour may strike and has perhaps already struck when God, to our discomfiture, but to His glory and for the salvation of mankind, will put an end to this mode of existence because it lacks integrity and has lost its usefulness. Yes, it could be our duty to free ourselves inwardly from our dependence on that mode of existence even while it lasts. Indeed, on the assumption that it may one day entirely disappear, we definitely should look about for new ventures in new directions (quoted in *The Noise of Solemn Assemblies*, by Peter L. Berger, p. 135).

The late Dick Shepherd, Vicar of St Martin-in-the-Field, who 'burned his way through the world of his day in a consuming fire of love' and who was described by a woman as 'a lighthouse and a series of explosions', wrote in his unforgettable book *The Impatience of a Parson* these words:

I am compelled, with the greatest reluctance, to believe that the churches have corporately so misunderstood the message of their Founder, and so mishandled and mislaid His values—the values of His Fatherhood—that what survives and does duty nowadays, through the churches, as Christianity is a caricature of what Christ intended. The churches need more than patch-work repair (p. 12).

Although sinfully involved in the affairs of the Church, the writer can unreservedly concur with the assessment of Dick Shepherd, even though after the Church Unions the United Churches have done some patch-work repair.