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The Challenge of the Church of South India

to Other Churches and to the Ecumenical Movement

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The challenge of the C.S.I. is both to do certain things and to avoid certain others. This is only to be expected, seeing that the C.S.I. has been characterized by *Crockford* as a 'dangerous experiment which ought, nevertheless, to be tried!' ('Lambeth 1948' used the words 'heroic experiment'.) Tensions and anomalies there are, and indeed there must be, and they are neither few nor unimportant, but they are, for the most part, mostly reflexions of the tensions and anomalies present amongst the parent churches.

The primary challenge of the C.S.I. is perhaps by its very being—just because it exists and *lives*. Here, at long last, for the first time in Church History, is a union of episcopal and non-episcopal churches. Church union is thus removed from the realm of theory and discussion to that of fact and actuality. After all, other things being equal, it is not a united church that needs justification! And indeed not only its parents, but also its neighbours in North India are taking up the challenge.

Challenge to the Concept of Denomination

The C.S.I. throws a challenge to the very concept of denomination, for the C.S.I. is in the nature of an attempted return to the New Testament conception of the Church as the whole body of Christians, worshipping and witnessing, in a particular locality. During recent centuries, we have become so accustomed to, and even complacent about or proud of, different denominations calling themselves 'churches' in a non-New Testament sense, and functioning side by side, that we have ceased to regard the phenomenon as being abnormal. There is even growing up, along-side of and partly as a reaction to, the ecumenical movement, what has been called 'Confessional Imperialism', i.e. 'pan-denominationalisms' of different kinds, harmless enough if only for the purpose of deepening the understanding of their own heritage when 'conversing' with other denominations, but objectionable to the extent that they tend to rivet the bondage of the younger Churches and to create an ecumenical deadlock¹. The younger Churches, with their

¹ C. W. Ranson, 'The Church is the Mission', *N.C.C. Review*, June-July, 1952, p. 278.

theological backwardness and their economic dependence, are particularly helpless in the face of such sectarian counter-moves.

The Challenge of the C.S.I. Pattern of Episcopacy

The C.S.I. has accepted the historic episcopate without committing itself to subscription to what is technically termed the Apostolic Succession. The historic episcopate, having thus been incorporated, the bishop is, in fact, coming to be regarded in the C.S.I. as the centre of unity *par excellence*; he is on the way to being a truly pastoral and a liturgical figure. Unlike the Tractarians, who emphasized the theory of the Apostolic Succession but failed in their attempt to restore the second-century episcopate to England, the C.S.I. which began with no theory but only the fact of the historic episcopate, seems to be reproducing the second-century episcopate in South India. In other words, there is being hammered out in South India a pattern of episcopacy, not perhaps entirely new in the history of the Church, but largely forgotten since the early centuries.

Wanted: A Doctrine of the Church

If the C.S.I. has not yet formulated a *full* doctrine of the church, it is not an omission due to oversight, but of set purpose, for, in the divided state of Christendom and in a newly united Church, such a doctrine can only be *evolved*, not *invented* afresh.¹ The C.S.I. has not yet issued any Confession of its own, for the present considering the historic creeds sufficient as a starting-point; otherwise such a confession may easily suffer from the handicap that besets most such historic documents which, composed in a different theological climate, soon become out-moded and even prove a hindrance to advance. After all, Truth is one, and its expression another; the saving verities of the Christian Gospel, which are few, must necessarily find a different expression in India, but a young church must not be rushed into such an expression. But what the C.S.I. *has* done is to have given concrete embodiment to an idea of the church which appears to have gained wide currency in recent years, an idea which received its first impetus from Streeter's *The Primitive Church*, but was developed further by Dr. L. Hodgson. Dr. Hodgson's view may be summarized as one which sees the Divine will at work alike in creation and in evolution. The church is thus a creation, but at the same time, it has to be evolved. This is the conception that has been put into practice by the C.S.I., although without employing identical phraseology. The church, like man, was originally created by God, but having split asunder and consequently lost, but not entirely lost, His image, must now in union endeavour to evolve into something of its original pattern. This process of evolution must necessarily be gradual. We do not know where it will lead; in the words of the Moderator of the C.S.I. at the second Synod: 'the demand to know where we are going is one which no Christian has the right to make.' But such a full doctrine of the church, so the C.S.I. believes, stands a fairer chance of formulation in a united church. There is some hope, in a united church, of a synthesis of the

¹ Read in this connexion C.S.I. *Const.* II, 2, 8, 9.

different traditions, of separating what is essential from what is not ; whereas, in denominational existence, the emphasis is more likely to be on the differences and, therefore, to be one-sided. The C.S.I. claims to be on the road to such unity but it does not pretend to have arrived at it ; it is willing to reform and correct itself in accordance with the teaching of the Scriptures as the Holy Spirit shall reveal it.¹

In this connexion, Bishop Stephen Neill, referring to a Roman Catholic work in German on the doctrine of the church, with the remarkable title *The Doctrine of the Church in Development*, draws our attention to the fact that 'even the Church of Rome, which has defined most things, has left here a wide area for further theological exploration'. And he goes on : 'If no one Christian communion has yet worked out a precise and satisfying theology of the church, its nature and its limits, the relationship between the visible and the invisible, the sense in which the church is the body of Christ its Head, it may be that, in the new fellowships which are coming into being in the twentieth century, new light and understanding may be given, through fellowship, and through the new tensions that life in fellowships brings.'² And the Moderator of the C.S.I., the Most Rev. A. M. Hollis, opening his essay in the Report already quoted, (p. 221) reveals perhaps the only satisfactory concluding stage in this discussion : 'We are conscious as we read our own Constitution, that it was written in the days when we belonged to separate churches, and that because we are now one church, we already see things somewhat differently. . . . Many problems of the conference hall that seemed almost insoluble when we faced each other from outside, with an obligation to defend the separate denominational emphasis, have taken on a very different appearance when we find ourselves handling them, as practical issues, within the fellowship of one Church.'

The C.S.I. comprehensive, but not latitudinarian, seeks to integrate Episcopal, Presbyterian, Congregational, Methodist and Reformed traditions, and this integration is taking place as the result of *living together* and *growing together*. In this process of integration, not only Episcopacy but Congregationalism and Presbyterianism are all being modified and are emerging in a different form, with a certain release of power, a growth in the theological understanding, and an increased fellowship, at least on the Synod and Council levels. Another fruit of this integration is the development, by the C.S.I., of its own form of discipline, which is unlike that formerly in vogue in churches of either excessive authoritarian or excessive Congregationalist traditions. (Incidentally, both that type of Episcopacy, so similar to political autocracy, and that type of Congregationalism, so similar to political democracy, have alike given rise to similar situations in Church discipline which the C.S.I. is having to face in its new set-up.)

The Challenge of Corporate Worship

Forms of worship play a significant part in keeping denominations divided from others but united amongst themselves. The Book of

¹ A. M. Hollis, in *The Nature of the Church* (SCM)—Faith and Order Report, p. 225.

² Stephen Neill, *Christian Partnership* (SCM), p. 90.

Common Prayer, for instance, is at once the badge of Anglican unity and of Anglican separateness. But the C.S.I. Liturgy (and the less known new Confirmation Order), have proved that both Catholics and Evangelicals can agree on a form of Sacramental Worship that is at once more Catholic and Evangelical, because more primitive, than any of the denominational liturgies. The C.S.I. Liturgy does not seek so much to modify any of the other Liturgies as to go right behind them. The emergence, therefore, of a C.S.I. Liturgy and its general approval by Anglican and Reformed Liturgical authorities, is no mean achievement, and may be said to be a challenge in a sphere where both theological and 'non-theological' factors are powerfully at work. A C.S.I. authority, of Anglican tradition, writes: 'None who has taken part at all regularly in the C.S.I. Liturgy can doubt that something fresh has come in for us all. Every time I go back to one of our old forms, I am conscious of the drop in a corporate sense, and I believe that we are being led into a form of satisfying Confirmation Service.'

The Challenge to the Ecumenical Movement

The Ecumenical Movement, it is well known, owes its genesis to conditions which arose, in course of time, in what is known as the Mission Field or the Younger Churches. The coming into being, therefore, of the C.S.I. is not so much a challenge to the Ecumenical Movement as its first fruits. The World Council of Churches, therefore, ought to rejoice, and indeed rejoices, in the birth of the C.S.I. And indeed, Dr. Visser t'Hooft, when asked to address its second Synod, said in acceding to the invitation, that he was 'feeling like a fish in water!'

But the tendency to regard efficiency of organization as an end in itself is a peril to be guarded against; that is the temptation of the bureaucrat. Then there is also the attraction to look upon intellectual integrity of ideas as another end in itself. Thus Dr. Alexander Findlay, in his 'Jesus and His Parables', has observed that 'the best modern evangelical theology is in real danger of creating a new kind of Pharisaism interested in Christian ideas such as the theology of crisis rather than any common earthly men and women.'¹ But the real church, as an organism and Fellowship of Believers, stands or falls, neither by efficiency of organization, nor by the intellectual integrity of ideas, but by the spiritual integrity of persons. In the words of the Rev. J. S. Garrett: 'this personal integrity can only be manifest in the context of local congregations grouped together in regional churches. The World Council of Churches cannot, as such, be the field of this essential factor in the church's life. If it remains content with a bureaucratic organization of common action amongst otherwise divided churches, or with providing a clearing-house for theological ideas, without promoting organic unity, it will have failed in its primary purpose.' The W.C.C., of course, has no other justification than as the spearhead of the Ecumenical Movement.

While on the subject of the Ecumenical Movement, it is useful to note a little more closely the background against which the C.S.I. took shape. The various missionary bodies working in India had agreed, as

¹ J. A. Findlay, 'Jesus and His Parables' (Religious Book Club), in Preface.

a practical necessity forced on them by pastoral and evangelistic exigencies, on the principle of the comity of missionary expansion, and thus in effect had unconsciously reasserted the New Testament idea of the local Church as an embodiment of the Universal Church. But as the post-Reformation Church, unlike the New Testament Church, was divided into denominations, the Concordat virtually made a man's denomination a matter of geography rather than of theology or conviction. This comity of missions has been increasingly stultified and rendered foolish when Christians of one tradition have moved from one area to another where the tradition was different. The problem, therefore, was either to disregard the comity of missions and to allow all denominations to work everywhere, side by side, (if not in virtual rivalry), or to go back to the New Testament idea mentioned above. It is with this background in mind that the whole union movement in the South must be studied.¹

The C.S.I. A Foreign Church?

One challenge, which has yet to be squarely faced, is the challenge inherent in the essential foreignness of the C.S.I., a fact to which the 'Derby Report' drew attention. It is foreign in its leadership, both central and local; nine out of its fourteen bishops are men from overseas, and that is not the whole story! The C.S.I. is in fact a 'combine' of several foreign churches, and is, therefore, just as foreign as any of them was in isolation, if not more foreign. It is not only foreign in its personnel; it is foreign in its very *ethos*; it is foreign in theology; it is foreign in its administrative machinery; and above all, it is foreign in its material resources. No wonder that, not taking into account Bishops and other conference *habitués*, there is more enthusiasm for the C.S.I. among most—not all—Missionaries than among indigenous clergy, which latter group hardly feel that they have a stake in the church, or among the laity, who were not adequately prepared for the coming union and have, therefore, largely reconciled themselves to it as inevitable. (When we use the word 'foreign', we do not use it as necessarily meaning less than Christian, but we do insist that the church is not rooted in the soil.) While, therefore, it is right that the C.S.I. should have been inaugurated, it would be a tragedy if drastic and early steps were not taken towards making both the C.S.I. and other churches indigenous, yet conscious of their incompleteness except in their ecumenical setting. As things stand, there is no guarantee that, in a crisis such as has overtaken China, the C.S.I. would fare much better than either the separated Churches in India would do or the churches in China have already done. The Editor of *Theology* once characterized the C.S.I. scheme as 'a high-minded amalgam of Anglican, Methodist, Congregational and Presbyterian elements, but not really a true Indian expression of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church'.² It is only fair to add that the evolution of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church of India is much more likely to come about in union than in isolation.

¹ See pp. 210-211, article by Garrett, 'Inter-communion in Churches' in *Intercommunion* (SCM).

² *Theology*, April, 1943, p. 74.

Non-Theological Factors

It has too often been assumed that disunity is due merely to theological differences; if it were so, the free churches, which, as a rule, have hardly had amongst them the problem of intercommunion or the exchange of pulpits, would have become united long ago—and so would some of the Syrian churches. The fact that often, when conversations are about to lead to negotiations, and negotiations to organic unity, they suddenly break down at the last moment, has given rise to thought as to whether other factors have been at work. Dr. C. H. Dodd, recognized this years ago, and his letter on the subject, together with similar findings from America and the author's remarks, form a chapter entitled 'Non-Theological Factors' in O.S. Tomkins' book *The Church in the Purpose of God* (SCM). And a report in the *Ecumenical Review* for January, 1952, recognizes that non-theological factors may either 'hinder or accelerate the church's unity'; and it supplies headings for self-examination.

The Principles of Federation and Supplemental Ordination

In the Church Union discussions, two questions crop up sooner or later, namely, (i) whether federation, instead of organic unity, would not suffice, and (ii) whether it would not be better to start with a unified ministry. As for federation, the idea is nothing new, and in the course of the negotiations in South India, the proposal, both in its theological and other aspects, was carefully considered and abandoned, as the germ of that idea was already in force in the comity of missions, an arrangement which was breaking down. Secondly, as regards any form of supplemental ordination or re-commissioning, this proposal was discussed and finally given up. Our more ambitious neighbours in Ceylon and North India are contemplating a 'neat and tidy' scheme by means of what appears to us a short-cut, but we are convinced that there is no short-cut to unity when disunity has held away for 400 years. Whatever form of ministry may emerge after a generation in the C.S.I., we have started with the recognition of ministerial equality, but making provision for tender consciences.

We all recognize, even the Romans in theory, that, when a person is baptized, he is baptized into the universal church. It ought not to be impossible to go one step further in church union *rapprochements* and recognize, at least as a measure of ecclesiastical economy, that, when a person is ordained, he is ordained to the universal church. In this connexion, it is interesting to note that Bishop Stephen Neill who, with a view to obviating the anomaly of episcopally and non-episcopally ordained ministers in the same Church, had formerly espoused the idea of mutual commissioning or supplemental ordination, has finally come to the conclusion, along with certain Anglicans and others, that there is no way but the C.S.I. way.

The Challenge of the C.S.I. and of the Ecumenical Movement to the Anglican Church

As far as the Anglican Communion is concerned, it must, before long, make up its mind as to whether it is prepared to be in communion with another Church which is Episcopal but which is also in communion

with non-Episcopal Churches. After all, Lambeth has characterized the South India Church as 'part of a movement towards general and complete union'. (It must be remembered, in this connexion, that the Church of England is already in communion with the Church of Sweden which is itself in full communion with other Lutheran, non-episcopal Churches and also that, for nearly a century and a half, until 1862, when the last missionary in Lutheran Orders died, the Church of England in South India had, amongst its ministers, non-episcopally ordained ministers, Indian and foreign.) The principle of free intercommunion is as important to the free churches as the historic Episcopate is to the Anglicans. In the words of Bishop Newbigin, in his 'Reunion of the Church':

'If South India is to be excommunicated by the Anglican Communion, it can only be because that Communion has decided that it cannot regard the non-episcopal Churches as parts of the universal church, that, apart from the historic episcopate, there is no church. If that decision is made, it must also *bring to an end Anglican participation in the ecumenical movement*, (italics ours) for it will have involved a clear rejection of its starting-point. If on the other hand, the South India Scheme is recognized as a valid attempt, within the conditions of a particular part of the world, to restore the visible unity of the church, then one cannot help feeling that the whole process of theological and ecclesiastical re-integration within the ecumenical movement will receive a new impetus.'¹

Return to Christ!

In the last resort, the movement towards unity is a movement towards Christ, from whom we have strayed away in different directions and thus strayed away from each other's fellowship as well. The challenge to return to Christ and, therefore, to unity amongst ourselves, could hardly be better expressed than in the closing paragraph of John A. Mackay on 'Thoughts on Truth and Unity', in his book *Christianity on the Frontier*:

'Jesus Christ, because He is the source of Christian truth and the soul of Christian unity, is also the goal of Truth's quest and its living expression on life's road. Christian thinking and Christian living are thus a moving out from Christ toward Christ and a return from Christ to Christ. Christian truth is inexhaustible in its meaning and Christian unity is inexhaustible in its possibility.'²



Apart from Jesus, men argue whether God is love; in his presence men believe it and live by it. Apart from Jesus, men argue about the meaning of life; in his presence they cease arguing and begin to follow. Apart from Jesus, men argue about human responsibility for sin; in his presence they fall down and ask forgiveness. To meet him is to know the truth, the truth that sets men free.—Daniel T. Niles in *That They May Have Life*.

¹ L. Newbigin, *The Reunion of the Church* (SCM), p. 187.

² J. A. Mackay, *Christianity on the Frontier*, (Lutterworth Press), p. 206.