

The Nature of the Unity We Seek

Unity for Worship and Unity for Service

A study of Chapter 15 of Paul's Epistle to Romans

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One of the slogans frequently heard in Ecumenical circles which makes some of us bewildered is: "The Church is a function of the Mission." I am not always sure what this means. We all can understand it the other way, that Mission is a function of the Church. But I suppose the sloganists use the word function in some other sense, e.g. in the sense that $ax + bx + c$ is a function of x . But I am not sure that this is what they mean, and all I can say at present is that the slogan puzzles me and that I do not understand it.

Another statement which has a higher standing in the Ecumenical circles is "Unity is not an end in itself. Unity is for Mission". That slogan does not puzzle me so much, I am even given the Scriptural reference which supports this second slogan namely John 17:21,23 "that they all may be one.... so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me". The Church then, I am told by some for whom my respect is very high, is but an instrumental or functional unit in God's economy.

We all know that the modern Ecumenical Movement has its roots in the Protestant missionary movement, and in that sense historically the need for union has been realized in the context of problems raised on the mission field.

But from a Biblical-theological point of view this conception of the relationship between the Church and its mission seems untenable. "As thou didst send me into the World, so I have sent them into the world"(Jn 17:18). Was the Incarnation merely functional in the economy of God or does it have an ontological reality beyond time?

Is the identity of Jesus of Nazareth with the Person of the Trinity a mere temporary affair for thirty-three years, or is it now an eternal fact? Is the Resurrection of Jesus Christ a mere function of God's economy, or is it an ontological- eternal fact? If we believe that it is more than a 'faith-event', then the same applies to the nature of those whom God has united to the Body of the Risen Jesus. I know I have a mission as a member of the Body of Christ, but my new being is not a result of my carrying out that mission. It is the free gift of God, to me, not dependent on anything else but the sheer grace of Him who has called me out of non-being to be His beloved son.

To believe that by working together we are going to find our unity is to conceive the unity of the Church in terms of the unity that exists among all the workers in a General Motors Plant.

The whole of the didactic section in St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans (chs 12 to 15) is on this question of the unity of the Church and its mission in the world. We will devote ourselves in our last study to the conclusion of this section - Chapter 15.

"We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves". This we are always prepared to do. In fact there are Churches today that are so strong that no one can stop them from aiding the weaker Churches in Asia and Africa. But their strength may not always be combined with wisdom, and so we need to listen to the Apostle's words in the second verse "Let each of us please his neighbour for his benefit with a view to building up". There is real danger even in this "post-paternalistic" era of Christian mission, of imposing our aid on weaker churches, with a view to pleasing ourselves by the thought that we have helped the weak. Most of us have become painfully aware of the dangers of 'propagation by procreation' in Missions, of reproducing in Asia, Africa and Latin America institutions and patterns which have been found to 'work' in the western world. It is a tragedy that many of the Christian leaders in the weak Churches are often too prone to co-operate in such "procreation" especially when the offer to duplicate the patterns and institutions of the stronger Churches in the setting of the weaker Churches is accompanied by tempting monetary aid.

There are three things to be noticed about the first part of Romans 15 (v.1-13)

1. Of course, St. Paul writing to the Romans was not speaking specifically about the relationship between the Churches, What he means by the "strong" and the "weak" are individuals and groups in this one local Church. The Apostle's primary concern, however, was always the building up of love (agape) within and between all units of the universal Church. Inter-Church aid should be given not merely for the sake of mission but also in order to build up or to bind together in a living relationship. We have to see that our aid to the weak always builds a relationship of genuine love between the giver and the receiver.

2. There is a great danger in Inter-Church aid. (I am not talking of the work of DICAQRS but rather of the whole picture of world church relationships), that just because the continuance of some work abroad seems necessary for keeping up the interest of the people at home, we are not to engage in large scale projects of aid. It is much easier to raise money for a project in Africa and thus keep a programme going in a Western Church, than to interest the congregation in the problems of their own society. Here there is danger that our aid becomes an item in our programme, rather than a means of fulfilling the needs of others. The subtle temptation of seeking to please ourselves in our Christian service has to be guarded against.

3. Thirdly, ultimately all aid must rebound to the glory of God. Giver and receiver should be

able, "in harmony with each other and in accord with Jesus Christ", to lift up their hearts in genuine thankfulness to God our Father for the love of God which has been manifested through opportunity to work together. (Romans 15:5-6) It must also be an occasion for genuine thanksgiving to God on the part of non-Christians, who have been served by the local Church and the aiding Church. "In order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy"(v.9)

These are good tests by which to evaluate the quality and usefulness of our inter-Church aid projects. Aid, or service, as we have seen, is not merely the fruit of worship. The mission of the Church whether in evangelism or in diakonia. must always spring from worship and result in worship,

The unity of the Church is not in mission. The unity of the Church is in the One Holy Trinity. The ultimate purpose towards which we should work is that there is one Church which has a common understanding of itself, of God, and of the world, which turns in one accord to worship God, and then is disposed in the world for mission.

We shall not study the second part Romans 15 in detail. Only two points can be emphasized here.

1. St. Paul speaks of a two-fold ministry given to himself, one to be the leiturgos of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, and the other to be the occasion for making the Gentiles' prosphora (offering-sacrifice, word used for Old Testament Sacrifices and in N.T. times for the Eucharist itself) acceptable and pleasing to God (V.16). The ministry of the Church as a whole must follow the same pattern. It stands always between God and the world, identified with both, manifesting God to the World through word and work, through life and Gospel, and also perpetually offering, ourselves as a sacrifice to God on behalf of the world. Both these functions, needless to say, are done in union with Christ.

It is tragic that we are too prone to conceive the work of the Church, and at times even the whole question of renewal of the Church purely in terms of 'study' and action. Are we simply to 'study' the Gospel and then 'study' society, and then to have a 'programme' for action. We sometimes think renewal will come this way. We even fondly hope that unity will come as a by-product of study and action in Mission.

Renewal of the church is, primarily an act of God. It is when Christ and the Holy Spirit quicken the Church to turn towards Him that the Church begins to be transfigured. It is in this transfiguration that all unity and mission becomes realized. A transfigured community is drawn towards the love of God, and unity and mission are both the fruit of love, not primarily of study and action. It is my humble but firm desire that in the World Church, whether in the World Council or otherwise, we should pioneer in the area of renewal by transfiguration; this must

begin in small communities who have a deep experience of genuine worship, and in the context of worship develop of community of real love, and as communities doing in Eucharistia and Agape, study and serve. Worship must become living, throbbing, vital, quickening. This will not occur through better preaching, nor will it happen through a use of traditional forms. The traditional forms, and I am referring to the forms as they came to fruition in the fourth and fifth centuries, embody a concept of worship which is not yet fully grasped by us. It is by re-capturing the Spirit of this worship that we can make our own worship meaningful.

But we are not bound by this tradition in a rigid way. In offering of the Church in the Eucharist was always on behalf of the World. The Holy Spirit has however, in our generation, led us to an understanding of the world which was never possible in previous generations. So our traditional understanding of worship must be enhanced and enriched by our new knowledge of the world. At this point all of us, whether Catholic or Evangelical, have to learn our lesson anew.

But the double meaning of Leitourgia as the Church standing before God on behalf of the world and before the world on behalf of God should be recovered. This is the true purpose and significance of the Liturgical Movement, and not the re-introduction of formal worship. We in the World Church need to pay attention to this Liturgical Movement which is the corollary of the "discovery of the world" by the Church in our time. In Romans 15:27, the Apostle calls the relief aid of the Macedonian and Achaian churches to the people in Jerusalem as their leitourgia. The Liturgical Movement, where it has not gone too "spiky", has both poles of Leitourgia in mind, God and the world. I put in a strong plea on behalf of this new theological understanding of the Church, its unity and its mission. This should become a major concern of the member churches of the World Council in the years to come.

2. The Second point relates to a different kind of polarity that the Apostle reminds us of in this chapter.

Inter-Church Aid must not only comprehend worship and work. It must truly be mutual. The great danger of the wealthy churches of the West going on giving aid to the poorer Churches, without receiving some aid from them, is maleficent for both groups. In the giver it produces an undue sense of its own comparative significance and in the receiver it cultivates on the one hand, a parasitic and therefore demoralizing attitude towards the wealthier Churches, and on the other hand also develop feelings of resentment against those on whom he is so inescapably dependent.

The Western Churches have begun to accept help from the Asian-Africa Latin America Churches in the form of personnel. Projects like the "Fellowship of the Least Coin" also provide an avenue for this two-way aid. But the poorer Churches must now take the initiative in developing a spiritual heritage along with our Western brethren. This is not merely a question of regaining our self-respect. The Western Church is much poorer than it is at present willing to

admit. Wealth, in the New Testament, is not money, but love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Gal 5:22). In these perhaps there are possibilities that the financially poorer churches can shone their wealth with the Western World. The Western Church, let us all hope, will not be too dogmatic about, its functional conception of the world, and be willing to be transformed by Christ into a more Sacramental understanding of the world. I have no time to explain that particular phrase, but what I mean is that this world is a "bearer of God", that human life is not meant merely to work hard and produce useful things, but truly to manifest the righteousness of God in a historical form.

At the point of these fruits of the Spirit, in spite of our deterioration in this technological age, the Christians of Asia, Africa and Latin America have a job, not merely of intellectualizing and transmitting the western Churches 'studies' on the fruits of the Spirit, but of genuinely manifesting these fruits in the life of our Churches in such a form as the affect the lives of the Western Churches. This cannot be done by the use of reams of mimeographed paper which we produce in our Churches. But this too can happen only when our poorer Churches turn to God in deep adoration, and allow our common life to be transformed by the spirit who will bear these fruits in our lives.

We must take the initiative in developing the technique of renewal, not through study and action, but through worship and peaceful joy. At present these two are the greatest needs of Western Church. We in the poorer Churches are temperamentally better suited to produce these fruits if we will allow the spirit to renew an inner being. And thus while our brethren in the west aid us with the fruits of their technological civilization, namely money and technique, we who have only ourselves to give to them, shall be turning to God be transformed into be imp that bring peace and joy to the whole world. "Blessed are the Peace-makers, for they shall be called the Sons of God".

In that common Sonship, O Lord our God, may we, Thy people all over the world, be united, that we may magnify thy name with one accord, and serve in peace and joy.