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The Calling of the Church to Mission and Unity

Findings of the Conference

The calling of the Church to mission and unity both arise from the eternal gospel which has been committed to its charge. The Gospel or the good news is that in the fulness of time God sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to present peace to them that were far off and to them that were near, and to reconcile to Himself by His death on the Cross all men who were the enemies of God. This redeeming work of God in Christ, as already accomplished in the Cross, as continued in His Holy Spirit in the Church, and as still to be completed in the hope of His mighty return, is the basis both of the mission of the Church, its apostolate, and the unity of the Church, its catholicity.

The obligation to take the gospel to the whole world is implied in the very nature of the Christian salvation. Because salvation is the gift of God, and not the fruit of the laborious effort of man ; because salvation is the gracious act of God, His mighty doing, it cannot but express itself in the grateful proclamation of divine generosity. A Christian is constrained to witness to the great things which the Lord has done for him.

The Church is the fellowship of redeemed sinners, gathered from the East and the West, North and South, welded into a super-natural society and founded by the Lord of the Church with His very life blood. It is the body of Christ, the continuous incarnation of Jesus Christ. And as His work was to seek and save that which was lost, so the work of the Church is to continue his work of redemption in the world, to witness to the great salvation which its Lord had achieved and to invite men to accept the offer and to join in the fellowship of the redeemed.

The calling of the Church to unity, to be one gathering of Christ's people, also arises from the same source, namely the work of God in Christ. 'God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself.' To the Church has been committed the message of reconciliation. And it is only as the Church is one that it can preach the gospel of reconciliation. A divided Church rent asunder by schisms and separations witnessing to a Lord who broke down middle walls of partition is a contradiction in terms.

The call to the Church to be one, to manifest the wholeness of Christ's ministry to the world, is contained in our Lord's prayer that they all may be one, that the world might believe. The world does not believe that Jesus was sent by God into the world for man and his salvation because the people of Christ are not one.

Mission and unity are indissolubly connected. They cannot be separated even in thought. They pertain to the very essence of the Church and they are the meaning of the Church being the body of Christ.

While this is what we are taught by the scriptures, our actual practice in this regard is very far short of it. It is true that the churches in India are growing in the awareness of their witnessing task, their missionary character. Many congregations and groups have launched out into regular programmes of witnessing and there is increasing missionary fervour. But still large numbers in the rank and file of the Church are unaware of the obligation to proclaim the word to all. We need to thank God for whatever measure of unity has been achieved among the churches in our country, some of it expressing itself in real organic unity. It is necessary to remember that it is as the churches recover their sense of the obligation to witness to the world that they have been led into a deeper and a fuller unity with one another. Similarly the concern for the unity of the Church has been for the purpose of a more effective witness to the world. The gospel is one, the world is one, and the mission of the Church is the total mission of the total Church to the total world.

While it is true that mission and unity are indissoluble and both obligations of the Church, in India the deep desire for unity and for a visible manifestation of that unity has come from the painful consciousness of the tragic futility of a divided witness. Denominational divisions in India have not even the secondary significance they have in the older churches. On the contrary their continued existence in India has been a standing refutation of the claim of the Christian gospel that it is the divine power for the breaking of the middle walls of partition. The Indian Church, therefore, has been arrested in its onward movement of evangelism because of its divided witness. This also explains the coming into being, in the grace of God, of the union churches and the many consecrated efforts going on for deeper and wider unity. Unity is a desirable good for the older churches; unity is an urgent necessity for the younger churches. It is also our experience that our Lord's call to His people to be one cannot be fulfilled by a mere discussion of the differences between the several branches of His Church but by a daring and obedient entrance into unity. We unite only by uniting. We must be willing in the strength of His Grace to sacrifice even our cherished connections if we sincerely desire our Lord's prayer to be fulfilled in our lives.

One practical expression of this new found awareness of the oneness of mission and unity has been the policy of integration of mission and church in the so-called younger church areas. But what is needed is an increasing tempo in the execution of this policy and at the same time a clear understanding that mere transference of power and amalgamation of Church and Mission organizations will not lead to the desired result of a dynamic, witnessing church. What is needed is God's grace to enter into a real partnership in obedience, a fuller and deeper understanding of the whole church proclaiming the whole gospel to the whole world.