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Jesus Christ who Frees and Unites

PETER TOON

ORIGINALLY SCHEDULED FOR Jakarta in July 1975, the fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches is now to meet in Nairobi in November 1975. This change of venue, necessitated by religious and political tensions (or the fear of them) in Indonesia, has not changed the theme which remains 'Jesus Christ frees and unites'. Readers will recall that previous Assemblies were held at Amsterdam (1948), Evanston (1954), New Delhi (1961) and Uppsala (1968). In the case of Nairobi (1975) it would seem that the preparation, in terms of theological thinking, has been inadequate—a matter which Bishop Stephen Neill discusses in his article.

My task is to offer a brief analysis of the preparatory literature which has been sent to all the delegates of the 267 member churches and which is on sale to the general public for £2.50 from the British Council of Churches. This literature comprises one booklet of 46 pages (published by SCM Press in 1974) entitled *Jesus Christ Frees and Unites* and six Dossiers (published by the World Council in Geneva), each of which expands a section of the booklet and contains a variety of information and quotations.

First, we turn to the booklet which is written in a popular, magazine style and illustrated with photographs. In answer to the question, 'What's the Assembly all about?', the writers of the booklet state:

All Christian thought and action must start with what God has done in Jesus Christ. He, we affirm, is the one who embodied the true freedom which makes for human fulfilment and for a radically new quality of our relationships. But when the Central Committee, seeking to provide a focus for the Assembly chose the theme *Jesus Christ Frees and Unites*, they deliberately set it in the present tense. It is not just a matter of what Christ did in his lifetime centuries ago, or promises to do in his kingdom at the end of time. *Today* is the day of salvation. *Now* is the time when his liberating and healing work is to be experienced, proclaimed and celebrated.

In order to study how the freedom and unity of Christ relates to our complicated world, the Assembly is to divide into six sections to look at the implications of the general theme in each area. These are:

1. Confessing Christ today.
2. What unity requires.
3. Seeking community.
4. Education for liberation and community.
5. Structures of injustice and struggles of liberation.
6. Human development.

The booklet briefly introduces each section but as the dossiers relate to these sections we shall return to them below. The rest of the booklet contains four Bible studies which are meant to be used in local church groups. They are:

1. Jesus Christ Liberator: But what kind of Liberator? (Mark 9: 2-32).
2. Liberation, in Living Memory (Lam. 6; Isa. 40:1-11; Deut. 6: 4-25).
3. Living Free (Rom. 8:1-39).
4. Real-Life Community (John 2:13-22; 8:30-59; 15).

Since the editors had a wealth of scholarship to draw upon, one is disappointed with the explanatory and applicatory comments—a matter which Roger Beckwith discusses in his article.

The first dossier, *Section I. Confessing Christ Today*, is made up of an introduction, nine briefs and a rather selective booklist. The whole material is introduced by these words:

Christians of all ages have sought to confess Christ as the natural and necessary response to their gratitude for God's redemptive activity in their own lives and in the world. In our time, there is a growing concern among the congregations of our churches that the traditional methods used to make confession of the Christian faith are inappropriate and inadequate in the context of the modern world. Both as individuals and communities, Christians are searching for new and more effective ways of confessing Christ to our world today.

Then follow a series of questions, which are noted by the Bishop of Truro in his article.

The briefs, which attempt to provoke thought concerning the confessing of Christ in today's complex world, are for the most part made up of quotations from books or documents.

1. *Confessing Christ—under necessity* (1 Cor. 9:16). With selections from Evelyn Underhill, Max Warren, William Stringfellow and Kosuke Koyama.
2. *Confessing Christ—by experience* (1 Cor. 12:3). With prayers, poetry and dialogue raising the question of the nature of conversion.
3. *Confessing Christ—out of the depths* (2 Cor. 4:10; 11:30). With two reports, one from a situation of injustice in South America

and one from a scene of poverty in North America and a meditation on Psalm 22:1-5.

4. *Confessing Christ—against the counterforces of salvation* (Luke 10: 17ff.). With five selections illustrating the variety of forms of evil in the world.
 5. *Confessing Christ—celebrating salvation* (Rev. 7:9ff.). With a description of the ‘theology of celebration (play)’ by J. Moltmann and a liturgy for a family prayer meal.
 6. *Confessing Christ—in unity* (John 17:21). With three passages from books from Asia and South America.
 7. *Confessing Christ—the whole Gospel for the whole man* (Matt. 11: 2ff.). With four selections, including an interview with Anthony Bloom.
 8. *Confessing Christ in contextuality—‘Discerning the signs of the times’* (Matt. 16:3). With three passages, from Manila, Hong Kong and Korea. (See the comments of the Bishop of Truro on this.)
 9. *Confessing Christ—in Orthodox Theology*. Full reports of a Consultation of Orthodox Theologians held at Bucharest in June 1974.
- Taking the briefs together, it can be noted that the last is by far the longest and also the most coherent.

The second dossier, *Section II. What Unity Requires*, is made up of four briefs with a booklist. The introduction briefly describes the ‘significant developments’ in ecumenism since the Fourth Assembly at Uppsala in 1968. The briefs are:

1. *The setting of the search for unity*. With a short quotation from the Uppsala Report, a long citation from the study document of the Faith and Order Commission, *Unity of the Church—Unity of Mankind* (1973) and two brief additional statements.
2. *The goal—how to describe the ‘unity we seek’?* With selections from a variety of WCC publications, several RC theologians—e.g. Yves Congar, and from the Evangelical magazine, *Christianity Today*.
3. *The growing consensus among the churches*. With five passages including an extract from the recent Anglican/RC Agreement on the Ministry, to illustrate the growth in mutual understanding.
4. *How can we approach the fulfilment of the vision of the one Church?* With eight very brief passages illustrating ‘many efforts towards the same goal’.

Of these the second is five times longer than the rest—see further the article by the Bishop of Truro.

From concerns peculiar to the Church of Jesus Christ we turn in noticing the third dossier to a vast panorama of involvement. The dossier is entitled *Section III. Seeking Community—The common search of people of various faiths, cultures and ideologies*. It proceeds on the assumption that ‘in the search for wider and deeper community,

it is Jesus Christ who unites, and that this quest for community, for a world community of communities, has started in Him and will be completed in Him'. The selections in the briefs refer to five types of situations. These are:

1. Multi-religious contexts, where in the search for a cultural ethos, classical religions and renascent movements including certain ideologies are involved—e.g. in Asia. Fundamental questions about personal freedom and the nature of community are raised.
2. Situations where the search for and the new forms of community are proceeding on ideological assumptions and involve struggles of liberation—e.g. in Latin America. What are the basic assumptions of faith behind ideological quests?
3. Situations where the resources of traditional religions or primal world-views are being used to undergird new forms of community—e.g. in Africa.
4. Countries where the political climate urges ideological conformity and where Christians, who may be in a minority, may find it virtually impossible to initiate or to be invited into dialogue but are nevertheless actively involved in sharing the process of building community—e.g. some Communist countries.
5. Situations of cultural crisis where traditional Christian structures are sometimes in difficulties in highly industrialised societies and where there may be a search for fresh resources for new forms of community and spirituality—e.g. in the USA.

The sixth brief is a useful booklist. A general impression of this material is that, in the light of the momentous questions asked, it is not sufficiently authoritative and powerful. Indeed it is but a very brief, and not always clear, introduction to a vast area of human experience and knowledge.

The fourth dossier, *Section IV. Education for liberation and community*, is really a call for preparatory action by Christian educationists before the Assembly. With the help of seven comic strips (!) and the seven briefs which describe educational developments or crises in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, the Caribbean, North America, and China, participants are encouraged to do the following:

1. Take some major innovation, experiment or new development in education, and analyse it carefully for its implications locally and elsewhere.
2. Study the terms "education", "liberation" and "community" in your situation, not just defining them, but exploring their meaning in your language and culture, illustrating each by the actual human experience you know that lie behind the words themselves.
3. Discuss what kind of education people would like—children, students, teachers, administrators, parents, preachers, lay people. For what purpose do they want that education? How does it relate to the Christian vision of free human beings in community?

4. Select one major conflict in educational policy or practice during the past year or two and make a careful analysis of it: why did it become a conflict? what was your attitude to it? the attitude of other groups? of the churches? . . .
5. Write a brief position paper on Education for Liberation and Community from your particular perspective, to share with and challenge groups in other situations. . . .

It is to be hoped that at least some groups, in obeying the fifth directive, will attempt to say what is 'Christ-centred' education, what it implies and how it is to be implemented in different cultural situations. Otherwise all we shall have is a variety of Christian insights into a variety of educational programmes and into the problem of illiteracy—see further the comments of J. Andrew Kirk in his article.

The task of the fifth group in the Assembly is set out in *Section V. Structures of injustice and struggles for liberation*. It is to examine 'patterns of domination against which the following groups are struggling—women, ethnic minorities and racially oppressed majorities, the poor and underprivileged, victims of human rights' violations, political prisoners, and the unemployed'. Also it is to examine 'the extent to which national and international military-economic systems create and perpetuate this domination'. We are informed that this twofold examination will lead to a consideration of the following five areas:

1. The still largely unfinished theological task of showing that these structures of injustice are incarnations of human sin, and clarifying the relationship between the conflict inherent in the struggle for liberation and the givenness of God's reconciliation.
2. The extent to which the decision-making bodies of the churches are themselves structures of injustice, as symbolised by the largely marginal position of the majority of church members: women, laity and youth.
3. 'Church structures, directly or indirectly, overtly or covertly, often support the oppressors and undermine the struggle for liberation. In fact, the élites of some churches benefit directly from the profits of corrupt and decadent societies.'
4. The practical implications to be drawn from the fact that God has time after time revealed Himself as on the side of the powerless, not to endorse their powerlessness but to secure justice. What glimpses can be discerned of the more just social order towards which God calls His people? How significant are ideological perspectives in giving shape to the Church's social engagement?
5. The continuing debate about strategies and forms of action appropriate to churches and individual Christians, as they seek to become more fully engaged in the world's struggles for justice and peace.

The three briefs provide selections from a variety of sources and deal

with 'Structures of Injustice', 'Struggles for Liberation' and 'How does Christ set free?' A booklist is provided which lacks entries from the right of the political spectrum, just as the briefs fail to condemn the atrocities of Communism.

Most Christians in the Western world are painfully aware of the poverty and inhuman conditions in which two-thirds of the world live today. It is this fact of human misery which lies behind *Section VI. Human Development—the ambiguities of power, technology and quality of life*. The four briefs provide material and raise questions under three basic headings:

1. New dimensions in the quest for development. These dimensions as defined by the Montreaux Consultation of 1970 are economic growth, social (distributive) justice and self-reliance.
2. Social responsibility in a technological age. The churches are here encouraged to think seriously about the ethical implications of new discoveries in science and technology as well as the use of older technology.
3. Criteria for the quality of life. In a world which seems to be increasingly controlled by the instrumentalities of scientific rationality the right relation between man and man, as well as man and nature, is being threatened.

What has the Christian Church to say to this situation? Again, the booklist is somewhat biased.

My general impression, after reading and re-reading the contents of the dossiers, is that it would have been far wiser to provide a basic reading list of five or six solid books for each of the sections and require participants to read these carefully. I presuppose, in stating this, that these books would reflect both different cultural origins and different political stances with respect to authorship and contents. And where possible they would reflect the best theological insights from Protestant, Orthodox and Roman Catholic traditions as well as from the developed and developing nations. As they stand the dossiers seem at times trivial, naive and imbalanced and, to be frank, unworthy of the attention of the many able men and women who are to make up the Assembly. Nevertheless, I hope that despite the necessarily inadequate preparation, the presence of the Divine Spirit will lead the participants into such a view of God's truth and purposes for our world and its people that much good will come out of this Assembly, especially since it is the first to be held on African soil, where, in God's goodness, the Church is prospering in many parts, and where, in times past, the churches were regrettably the handmaids of an unjust capitalism.