

The Idea of a Regional Church

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The relationship between the unity of the Church and diversity within the Church is one of the great questions underlying current discussion on the unity and growth of the Church. Therefore the concept of a Regional Church as representing diversity within the Church needs to be carefully examined.

By a Regional Church is meant the Church of a region which in its whole life, worship and witness faithfully adheres to the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, in the existence of which confession is made in the Christian Creed. This means that in any given region the Church is the Church of God, the Holy Spirit permeating the members of the Body of Christ, the Church; and not merely so many isolated and unrelated exclusive groups of Christians mutually excluding one another in the Name of Christ.

The concept of a Regional Church is not something new, developed only in recent years in Church history. Nor is it right to think that such a concept is the result of the modern oecumenical movement and the various regional plans for Church Union. In the period of the New Testament the idea of the Regional Church is already present. In the Epistles we read of the Church of God in Corinth, the beloved of God in Rome, all the saints of Christ Jesus at Philippi, the faithful brethren in Christ which are at Colossae, the Church of the Thessalonians. This is because believing, confessing and baptized Christians in any given geographical area are looked upon and addressed as 'partakers of the heavenly calling'; 'partakers of Christ'; 'partakers of the Holy Spirit' and, therefore, recognized as fellow-heirs of God with Christ in the Holy Spirit. The Oneness in Christ of all Christians is recognized and zealously nourished. St. Paul's challenge 'Is Christ divided?' and his metaphors of the Church as a body and one building further emphasize the fact that the Church is the Church of God, the Head of which is Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit the life-principle of the fellowship of believers. This means One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism, and, therefore, One Church of Christ. The Church is the fellowship of those called out in the Name of Christ and gathered together in one fellowship by the Holy Spirit, owing allegiance to and worshipping and witnessing to God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Such a concept of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church in any given region is worked out gradually in the context of the regions concerned. The total task of such a Church is to be studied and understood in the unfolding of the five aspects of the life and mission of the Church in any given region. These aspects are: the Mission of the Church, the Polity of the Church, the Doctrine of the Church, the Worship of the Church and the thought patterns and life ideals informing and guiding the life of the Christians in their total set-up of life. In other words we have in each region the Gospel, the Church, the Creed, the Liturgy, and the Christian view of life and way of life.

THE FIVE PATRIARCHATES

In the developing life of the Church it is interesting to watch how these five aspects are given expression in characteristic ways in the various regions in which Christianity spread. Within a few centuries we are presented with the fact of five great regional centres of the life, thought, worship and witness of the Church. These five great Regional Churches are represented by Jerusalem, Antioch, Rome, Alexandria and Constantinople. Along with the developments of the five aspects mentioned above, we see that gradually certain specific characteristics begin to distinguish Christianity in each of these regions. Broadly speaking, we can describe the primary distinguishing marks in terms of Greek Christianity and Latin Christianity, or Eastern Christianity and Western Christianity. We see in this the germs of the developing patterns of Byzantine Christianity and Roman Christianity.

In order to understand this broad distinction between the two great regional wings of the One Church we must see how these two regional wings developed within their own specific contexts. In the West there is the one Patriarchate of Rome, but in the East we have the Patriarchates of Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria and Constantinople. The course of secular history and the inevitable pressure of theological and non-theological factors brought about, not only a growing division between the Eastern Patriarchates under Constantinople and the sole Western Patriarchate of Rome, but also among the four Eastern Patriarchates. These divisions became clear-cut after Chalcedon; firstly, as between the Orthodox Byzantine Christianity and the Catholic European Christianity and, secondly, by the establishment of the separated and national, autonomous Churches of the East. In both cases such divisions came about in the context of the claims of the Western Patriarch for sole dominion over all Christians in matters of Faith and Order, and the claims of the Byzantine Patriarch also from his side to regulate the Faith and Order of all Christians. The post-Chalcedonian development in Church history in the East and in the West confirmed this, and the great Schism of 1054 made the division between the two great regional wings of the One Church definite in Church history.

These patriarchates became exclusive in their claims of Orthodoxy and Catholicism, and mutually excluded one another. The divisive forces brought in by political, national, social, cultural and intellectual factors were further accentuated by the Byzantine caesaro-papalism and the papal imperialism of Rome. Yet it is interesting to note that, while, in the East, regional national Churches developed, in the West national Regional Churches could not blossom till the Reformation. In the developing life of the Church we see that one of the determining factors of the Reformation was the principle of a Regional Church, this time more recognizably, in terms of an autonomous, independent, sovereign national Church in the context of the various European nation-states, as against the Roman ecclesiastical autocracy and papal imperialism. The Church of England is one such example of a Regional Church. We have in Hooker's *Ecclesiastical Polity* a magnificent apologia of the Church of England as the One Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church in Great Britain. Article 34 of the Thirty-nine Articles also speaks of 'particular or national Churches'.

Today a recovery of some of the principles of a Regional Church has become all-important because of the oecumenical movement in general, and in particular, because of the movement towards Church Union in certain regions in more recent years, as well as because of the inauguration of the Church of South India. Those of us who are great enthusiasts for the oecumenical movement and Church Union will do well to remember that in the formative centuries of the life of the Church oecumenical councils were meaningful because they were meetings of representatives of Regional Churches. But later such oecumenical councils were rare, and, if summoned, were only regional oecumenical councils. This also applies to the Councils, Vatican and others, since the Reformation. The oecumenical movement as we know it today is 'regional oecumenism' of post-Reformation Protestant European Christianity. It is significant, therefore, that Rome, which has always been suspicious of the modern oecumenical movement, is attempting to begin again where it left off in 1054 by wanting to summon an oecumenical conference between the Eastern Churches and the Roman Church.

A REGIONAL CHURCH IN ASIA TODAY

For us today who want to understand the growth and development of some of the principles of a Regional Church, it is essential that there must be in the first place a reconciliation between the mutually excluding ecclesiastical principles underlying Byzantine and Roman Christianity. Only such a reconciliation will lead to an appreciation of the principles of Orthodoxy as representing Eastern Regional Christianity, and the principles of Catholicism as representing Western Regional Christianity. An understanding of the theology of Orthodoxy and the theology of

Catholicism will enable the theology of Protestantism to bring about that theology of oecumenism which will justify the principles of oecumenism not only to Orthodoxy, but also to the Catholic, the Evangelical and the Pentecostal sections of European Protestantism, as well as to Romanism. This will pave the way to help us to understand, though the Roman claims be otherwise, that European Catholicism and European Protestantism are but two aspects of the Regional Church of Europe. The oecumenism of post-Reformation European Protestantism as well as Roman Catholicism must take more serious note of this fact.

Again, for this reason, the Churches of Asia, Africa and Latin America, which are mainly the off-shoots of post-Reformation European missionary societies, papal and non-papal, should divest themselves of Western ecclesiastical and denominational determinism and begin to take today a more keen theological interest in some of the principles of a Regional Church and refuse to be merely exhilarated by oecumenical encounters or be dazzled by Geneva. We need to understand the theology of a Regional Church as interpreted by Rome, Canterbury and Geneva (before we can understand the Catholicism of these three), remembering that such theology of ecclesiastical regionalism is conditioned by post-Chalcedonian theological and non-theological factors of the developing life of the European Regional Church from Chalcedon to the Reformation.

This has to be emphasized because we in India today need to realize that any recovery of some of the principles of a Regional Church must mean a recognition of the fact that in the development of Regional Churches there are three distinct periods: —

1. Pre-Chalcedon, 2. From Chalcedon to the Reformation, 3. Post-Reformation. It is our failure to recognize this which is responsible for our present state of affairs in which we who have inherited the Gospel of Christ via the Western Regional Churches confuse our sacred stewardship of the Holy and Eternal Gospel of God in Christ with our mundane sense of proprietorship of ecclesiastical denominationalism. What is at stake today in Asia and Africa is not denominational Christianity but the very Gospel of Christ. This being so it is incumbent on every thinking Christian in these predominantly non-Christian lands, set in the midst of vital non-Christian Faiths, to try and recover some of the principles of a Regional Church as we see them worked out in the Regional Churches of the Early Church of the pre-Chalcedonian era. This will help us to understand the development of such principles of a Regional Church in the post-Chalcedonian and post-Reformation periods.

DISTINCTIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF EARLY REGIONAL CHURCHES

In each of the Regional Churches centering round Jerusalem, Antioch, Rome, Alexandria and Constantinople it should be possible to trace the development of the five important aspects of the

total life of the Church in any given region. Such a study will enable us to see how in a given region Christian life and witness is expressed in terms of 1. The preaching of the Gospel (the Mission of the Church), 2. The organized ecclesiastical life of the Christians (the Polity of the Church), 3. The ways in which the Christians were helped to understand the Faith for themselves and to explain it to others (the Doctrine of the Church), 4. The rites and ceremonies for the worship of God as Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier (the Worship of the Church), 5. The regulation of the life of the Christian set in the midst of non-Christians (the Christian life in pagan society). Thus we have in each region the Gospel, the Church, the Creed, the Cultus and the Culture: all interpreted and understood in the light of the Revelation of God, Man and World, through Jesus Christ, Incarnate, Crucified, Risen, Ascended and Glorified, and the continuation and perpetuation of His revelation, redemption and reconciliation by the Holy Spirit in the One Church. Herein we have the theology underlying the life, mission, worship, teaching and culture of the Regional Churches. Further we also get a glimpse of how in these Regional Churches the day-to-day living of Christians in non-Christian society affected both the view of life and the way of life adopted by Christians because of the Christian Revelation and the view of life and the way of life traditionally followed by followers of other Faiths. In other words, in the developing life of the Regional Churches the thought-patterns and the life-ideals generally accepted in society are vitally affected because of the impact of the Church and its teaching in these regions.

It is very interesting to see how in the working out of the above five aspects of the life of the Church in these Regions we can detect certain emergent regional principles which predominate in particular regions. We also realize that such emergent principles are the result of the impact of Christ, His Gospel and His Church on the cults, philosophies and religions in these regions. An overall survey of the developing life of the Church in these regions helps us to realize that these Regional Churches are not only set in the midst of paganism, intellectualism and nationalism, but also, because of that, each of them develops a characteristically peculiar way of interpreting the Gospel in the context of its own immediate surroundings.

It is suggested, therefore, that the Regional Churches of Jerusalem, Antioch, Rome, Alexandria and Constantinople each represents one of the more important principles of a Regional Church. These principles are: 1. The principle of fulfilment. 2. The principle of communication. 3. The principle of the good life. 4. The principle of comprehensiveness. 5. The principle of uniformity. (True, all these principles are found at work in each of the Regional Churches under review, but because of the religious, cultural and philosophical differences in their immediate surroundings it was inevitable that in these regions one of these principles should be emphasized more than the others). Before

we finally list these Regional Churches one by one as representatives of one of the above five principles it will be useful to amplify these five principles.

The principle of fulfilment : The Gospel through the Church fulfilling the philosophical, spiritual, liturgical and ethical longings of the various types of philosophies, religions, cults and moral endeavours.

The principle of communication : In this process of fulfilment an effective encounter is made with non-Christian faiths and systems and there results a fruitful two-way communication which affects both the view of life and the way of life taught by the Christian Faith and as held by the followers of non-Christian Faiths.

The principle of the good life : All religions and philosophies seek to deal with life, good life, and more abundant life because they deal with the meaning and purpose of life. For those who thus seek a meaningful way through existence, the Christian Gospel through the Church points to the more excellent way, the New and the Living way through Christ who said, I am the Way.

The principle of comprehensiveness : The problem in the society of that day was to find the answer to the question: what is that which comprehends all and stays disintegration of life, personal and social ? The Church set in the midst of such a query presented the Gospel as providing the principle of integration both for the integration of personality as well as that life-force providing for the integration of the common life in a world disintegrating under the impact of various forces, spiritual, rational and material. The Christian Gospel proclaimed through the Church in these regions was welcomed as providing the way of comprehensiveness.

The principle of uniformity : In the society of the day many philosophies and cults were campaigning for the total allegiance of man and were out to annex the mind and heart of man for particular philosophies and cults. The presence of these rival philosophies and cults made it necessary that not only among Christian converts but also among all people there should be some uniformity of belief and worship. The Gospel was proclaimed as having claims overriding all others and the Church was represented as providing that uniformity in belief, worship and organization that would guarantee for man peace of mind and quietness of heart.

It is not fanciful to see in each one of the five great Regional Churches some one of the above principles emphasized more than the others. For example in Jerusalem, because of Judaism, the principle of *fulfilment* is emphasized ; in Alexandria, because of the prevalence of philosophies, the principle of *communication* looms large ; in Antioch, where the followers of Christ were first called Christians, and because it became customary to refer to the Christians as the people of the Way, we may say that the principle of *the good life* must have been emphasized more than the others ;

in Constantinople, because of political and national factors, and in order to keep together people of diverse races, religions and tongues, the principle of *comprehensiveness* must have been emphasized; in Rome, the heart of the Empire, for obvious reasons, the principle of *uniformity* found favour.

Books and Publications Received

C.L.S., Madras :

- James Kellock. ETHICAL STUDIES. (Christian Students' Library No. 19). Rs.3/75.
Murray Titus. ISLAM IN INDIA AND PAKISTAN. (C.S.L. No. 20). Rs.3/75.
L. M. Schiff. THE CHRISTIAN IN SOCIETY. (C.S.L. No. 21). Rs.3/-.
W. Stewart. THE FAITH WE CONFESS. Re.1/-.

Baptist Mission Press, Calcutta :

- J. G. Jones. A GOOD MINISTER OF JESUS CHRIST. Re.1/75.
A. M. Hollis. UNITY: HOPE AND EXPERIENCE. Re.0/75.

S.C.M. Press (c/o Y.M.C.A., 5 Russell Street, Calcutta 16) :

- K. Cragg. SANDALS AT THE MOSQUE. 12/6sh.
I. T. Ramsey. FREEDOM AND IMMORTALITY. 16sh.
P. Maury. PREDESTINATION AND OTHER PAPERS. 12/6sh.

Carey Kingsgate Press, London :

- E. Payne. THE FELLOWSHIP OF BELIEVERS. 8/6sh.
H. Wheeler Robinson. THE LIFE AND FAITH OF THE BAPTISTS. 6sh.

Tyndale Press, London :

- R. P. Martin. THE EPISTLE OF PAUL TO THE PHILIPPIANS. 8/6sh.
Carl Henry. REVELATION AND THE BIBLE. 17/6sh.

Inter-Varsity Fellowship :

- G. T. Manley. THE RETURN OF JESUS CHRIST. 4sh.
J. G. S. S. Thomson. THE PRAYING CHRIST. 10/6sh.

The Fellowship of Reconciliation :

- Current Issues of 'ARUNODAYAM'.

(The above books have either been already reviewed or are awaiting review).